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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study used a multidimensional social perspective on learning and literacy to look at the educational experiences and perspectives of urban young people through an examination of student homework. Subjects, upwards of 40 young people, were drawn from four sites: a sixth-grade classroom at Woodside Elementary School (located in a middle-class residential neighborhood in the San Francisco Bay Area, California); Families and School Together (FAST), an after-school tutoring program which serves mostly African-American students at Colton Middle School; the homes of three students; and small friendship groups. Results indicated that homework is neither a stable nor a static thing. It moves through space, from school to home and home to school. Homework also travels through time, reaching both backward and forward with its promises, evaluations, and consequences. Results also indicated that young people's attitudes and identities were, in many ways, forged around homework as a contested field of meaning and practice. On the one hand, beliefs and actions were shaped by various personal, educational, and social significances of school-sent-home. at the same time, what young people thought and did, fed back into these realms of meaning, helping to define and create homework itself. Findings suggest an important discrepancy: while school and teachers view kids' classroom experiences as focused primarily on academic learning, young people themselves are engaged in a multifaceted negotiation of identity, position and future. (Includes 20 notes; contains 50 references.) (RS)

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ED 382 998

FINAL REPORT

FAMILIES, LITERACY, AND SCHOOLING

What's School About for Kids?: Meanings and Uses of Homework in Young People's Lives

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May, 1995

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Part 1
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

The present study grows out of a one-and-a-half-year ethnography of kids and schooling in the San Francisco Bay Area. Our work begins with a multidimensional social perspective on learning and literacy and uses it to look—through an examination of student homework—at the educational experiences and perspectives of urban young people. The project focuses on homework as a literacy and learning event which originates in schools and travels from there to young people's homes, neighborhoods, cultural and community settings, friendship networks, and so on. In moving through the time and space of kids' lives, homework manifests and highlights many social and cultural dimensions of literacy, literacy-learning, and education more generally. For students, its varied intricacies both illuminate and reflect a web of individual, family, cultural, and socioeconomic—as well as educational—relations.

It is our aim in this report to explore such relations in pursuit of a kid-centered understanding of education. Using the lens of homework as a literacy event, we are concerned to rethink three central questions in educational inquiry: What do young people learn in and through school? How do they shape, understand, and use their learning? And what is school really about in their lives?

To penetrate these questions, we have talked with ten-, eleven- and twelve-year-olds from a variety of different backgrounds about their experiences of homework and about the many types of learning which engage them. In addition, we have followed these young people and their homework around, observing their activities and interactions in several locations—at an after-school tutoring program; in families; in friendship groups; at home; and in a sixth-grade classroom at Woodside, a multicultural urban elementary school.

The observations and analyses we offer in the following sections focus on the often messy details of how kids enact homework in the concrete, always shifting contexts of their lives. Looking at the social as well as academic complexities of young people's homework experiences has suggested to us that, on an analytical level, it is important to complicate traditional notions about the purposes, functions and practices of literacy, learning and schooling. Most generally, we have noticed that students' perspectives on homework—indeed on education itself—do not directly match the views of their teachers and schools. Educational institutions present homework texts, for example, as means for learning academic material and good work habits; kids, by contrast, understand and use these texts more broadly; homework becomes for them a practice which also articulates with the learning of identities and social relationships.

We believe that this mismatch of understanding and activity reflects several interlocking realities. First, school is not an entity entirely unto itself. Both as institution and as experience, education is enmeshed with many other aspects of young people's lives, as well as with society and culture. At a personal level, kids' everyday educational experiences speak directly and concretely to the varied emotional, practical, and relational worlds in which they live. At the same time, broader social dynamics are also at work. The institutional practices of educating children do not simply encompass individual academic sensibilities; instead, they both reflect and shape society's entire array of goals, struggles, histories, limitations and possibilities.

Second, school is more than simply a place where kids study. It is also an arena of interaction, a sphere of social contexts in which young people spend a great deal of time and do a significant amount of living as well as learning. Day after day, year after year, kids inhabit the interpersonal, material and ideological—as well as academic—spaces of educational practice. They do a lot of different things at school: they play, they observe, they listen, they chat, they make and lose friends. they produce work, they assert themselves, they size up others, they face judgements and evaluations, they make choices and state opinions and struggle for understandings.

Finally, and relatedly, for young people, learning in school involves not a single process but many different processes. It includes more than simply the mastery and appropriation of what teachers teach—both directly in lessons and indirectly, by example and through "hidden curricula" (Apple, 1990). As we hope to demonstrate, it also encompasses, through varied activity, a number of personal, interpersonal, cultural, social and political negotiations which weave in and around—and which affect—the lessons and practices of classroom academics.

The remainder of our report investigates these and other issues as they relate to young people's homework experiences. We have organized the report in three parts. The first part offers introductory and background information about the project. It begins by raising general views about homework and contrasting schools' perspectives with the overall understandings of young people. From there, it moves to a discussion of our research design and methodology. We conclude Part 1 by tracing the theoretical roots of our study; in particular, we detail the ways that sociocultural theory and sociolinguistic analysis inform and enrich our work.

In Part 2, we present our ethnographic observations and analyses of how homework and schooling fit into young people's lives. In the section on "Embedded Contexts," we examine the overlapping realms in which homework is situated for different students. Our goal here is twofold. On the one hand, we want to suggest that, for kids, schooling, literacy, and learning are embedded in various other arenas of life—family, culture, community, social class, gender group, neighborhood, friendship circles, and so on; at the same time, we argue that these other dimensions of experience are also embedded in the day-to-day practices of school. We follow this discussion with a section called "The Negotiation of Identities." Here, we draw upon a variety of observations and interviews to show that much of what kids learn in and around homework involves the individual and collective construction of their identities. We suggest that, both when assignments leave school and when they do (or do not) return, young people's homework experiences reflect and shape a variety of personal, cultural and social—as well as educational—understandings.

The final portion of the report pulls together these two ethnographic segments. In it, we examine the implications of centering young people's views of homework and of taking seriously the many different roles it plays in their lives. We return here to a discussion of the mismatch between kids' perspectives and school perspectives, and we end with some general comments on the meanings and uses of education, learning and literacy in young people's worlds.

WHAT IS HOMEWORK?

At one level, everyone who is familiar with the American educational system—whether kid or adult—knows what "homework" is. It is a part of school which gets sent home in children's bags every afternoon, potentially including any of a number of tasks. For the fifth and sixth graders who have been involved in our study, homework usually centers on literacy-related and literacy-building activities. These activities routinely include reading textbook chapters, answering questions about material they have read, writing essays or stories, memorizing dates or rules, and practicing mathematical computations. In addition, their teachers occasionally assign "outside reading," book reports, research papers, or science projects which are intended to be completed "after hours" and "at home," preferably with the help of parents or other adult family members. Sometimes, homework assignments relate directly to things that have gone on during the school day. On other occasions, the work to be done outside of school is more self-contained, without specific or obvious ties to other classroom concerns.

From a school perspective, homework is pretty much a standardized activity. In the class we have observed, despite teacher John Coleman's acknowledgement that kids have different strengths, different degrees of academic preparation, different attitudes and different circumstances outside of school, he nonetheless presents homework in a uniform manner to all children. Every student is assigned the same tasks, and there is a common standard invoked about the value of homework and when and how it should be done. Within the school framework, homework is designed to be about "learning": reinforcing skills, practicing and mastering information, gaining independence and self-motivation, acquiring good work habits, and developing a sense of discipline. Mr. Coleman, for example, explained to us one morning that he wants his students to do their homework regularly and carefully because he believes that doing so will help them to succeed. In his view, consistent completion of homework—as both a part and a reflection of educational progress—will give every child the chance to do well in their current and future school endeavors. This, in turn, will lead to desirable, productive career paths and life trajectories.

Most academic research on the subject of homework shares this school-based perspective and focuses on academic dimensions and curricular issues. The vast majority of studies address and debate a relatively small, consistent set of questions:

Is homework an effective learning device? How much time should children spend doing [illegible] Does it increase or decrease student academic interest? Does homework improve students' attitudes, or does it lead to burnout? Does it improve student literacy and achievement? And does it "succeed" in involving parents to a significant degree in their children's educations? (See Cooper, 1989 for a comprehensive review of research on homework over the past 50 years. A shorter, more critical review of this literature appears in McDermott et. al., 1984.)

But what do young people think? What do they feel are the most salient issues about homework? In what varied ways does homework and the literacy involved in it interact with their learning? How do they understand the traditional school views, and what do they say about the ways homework plays out in their lives?

A group of sixth grade girls offered us some introductory thoughts on these matters as we were sitting around at school one afternoon eating lunch.

> Sonia: You start talking about homework and it leads to something else. You can never just talk about homework.
>
> Michelle: Why not?
>
> Sonia: Because it always leads to something else. It leads to other students and what they say. It leads to subjects...
>
> Amanda: To ideas, like our babysitting service where we make money.
>
> Sonia: T.V. schedules for some reason.
>
> Angela: It leads to your surroundings, your environment.
>
> Michelle: It leads to what you think of here and it gets you out in the real world. It leads to...
>
> Tamara: (interrupting, and somewhat sarcastically): It leads to the world.

These girls went on to describe in detail many connections and tensions between homework and other aspects of their experiences. As they see it, what homework is and the meanings it acquires shift and change from person to person and context to context. In some ways, homework is to them exactly what their teachers say it is—a learning tool, a means of validating their progress, and a self-controlled key to academic success. But this is not the full story. In addition to being an educational device, they experience homework as a complex *social* practice, one which moves around from place to place and involves a variety of interpersonal negotiations.

In the essay, "When School Goes Home: Some Problems in the Organization of Homework" (1984), R. P. McDermott and his colleagues argue that academic research on the subject of homework should (but does not) focus on social and cultural issues such as the ones suggested by these sixth grade students.

> Essentially, all the conversation on the issue of homework uses a language of skill and achievement, all supposed properties of individual children...By this focus homework is considered successful when it leads to more skills and more achievement for more youngsters. Our argument is that before a language of individual traits is adopted—before homework is understood on the basis of skills and achievements on school tasks—one must know what homework is, how it works at home and school, and what it does to persons relating to each other around it. (1984: 397)

This sentiment echoes important sociolinguistic goals for understanding literacy activities more generally. Following Dell Hymes (1972), Anne Haas Dyson and Sarah Warshauer Freedman (1991) explain that, overall,

> [w]ays of using both oral and written language are…interrelated with ways of living—historical and geographical conditions; social and economic resources and opportunities; religious beliefs, values and motivations.… Written language is thus always "embedded"—it always figures into particular kinds of communicative events and activities. Its form varies depending upon its uses. (1991: 5)

As the girls quoted above point out—and as the activity and ideas of many other young people in our study demonstrate—homework is about a great deal more than academic achievement, intellectual progress and future success. We have found that people's actions and struggles around homework reflect also their broader and multifaceted experiences—the contextual forging of social alliances and divisions, positions and perspectives, choices and constraints.

What then is homework? We propose that it be viewed in 2 ways. On the one hand, it encompasses the accumulated mass of textbook questions, worksheets and other projects teachers send home at the end of every school day. On the other hand, and more importantly for this research, homework is a complicated social phenomenon. To the kids in our study, despite the standard format that it acquires in the school arena, homework is not simply an object—a set of tasks, a series of papers, a list of school assignments. And it is more than a mere responsibility or a clearly defined obligation. The mediations which children effect around homework and related literacy practices highlight in significant detail the complex strategies they have for understanding and integrating a variety of different personal, interpersonal, cultural and political, as well as educational aspects of their lives. In many ways, then, homework is most notably a *process*—a set of relationships, a moving path, an activity, a series of promises and a chain of present as well as future effects.

OUR RESEARCH

Because homework is a moving and many-faceted phenomenon, we have conducted our research about it in a variety of settings, sites and social contexts. In particular, we have investigated young people's experiences, interactions, negotiations and struggles in four interlocking arenas.

Arenas of Exploration

Observing in Mr. Coleman's sixth grade classroom at Woodside Elementary School has given us the opportunity to explore school-related dimensions of homework: how it operates, what gets said about it, and how young people interact with it in an academic context. For approximately one school year, we visited the class regularly—usually two or three times a week. Most times we went, we would watch homework-checking or homework-assigning sessions. Frequently, we also talked with students about their experiences of homework and school—or whatever else. Over time, we came to develop especially close ties with two small friendship groups of girls and one group of boys. In addition, on two occasions, at our request, we engaged the whole class in discussions/projects related to the research.

Mr. Coleman's class contained thirty-two students. Like Woodside as a whole, it had a multiethnic make-up and a multicultural feel. [1] Of the thirty-two young people in the class, fourteen were African-American, seven were Asian or Asian-American, five were White, three were Latino, and three were of mixed race/ethnicity. There were roughly even numbers of girls and boys. Woodside School itself is situated in a quiet, middle-class, residential neighborhood of a fairly large urban area. The school draws its population both from its immediate surroundings and from other areas of the city, although its student population is fairly representative of the city-as-a-whole's diverse demographics. It is considered a "good school" for its district, "a cut above" as one of the teachers explained to us when we began our work there. Students in Mr. Coleman's class and in the school more generally come from a wide variety of socio-economic, as well as ethnic and cultural, backgrounds. Among Mr. Coleman's students, these socio-economic differences appeared to crosscut—but not completely undermine—ethnic and racial categories. Mr. Coleman is himself an African-American man who has been teaching for about twenty-five years, fourteen of them at Woodside.

The second site at which we have conducted our research is Families and School Together (FAST), an after-school tutoring program which serves mostly African-American students at Colton Middle School. Colton is situated in a slightly different, and somewhat more urban, setting than Woodside, though it is also located in the San Francisco Bay Area. The school serves fourth to sixth grade students who come mostly, but not exclusively, from its immediate neighborhood. The area is somewhat mixed both in terms of socio-economics (working class in one direction, some middle class in the other) and in terms of race and ethnicity (largely African American but with a significant number of white residents and a smattering of people from other backgrounds as well). Colton has a reputation for being a bit rough and tough (as schools for this age go) and also for understanding fairly well the needs of its African American students.

Taking the roles of both tutor and observer in FAST, we had the opportunity to stand with young people in the spaces they inhabit between school and home. This has allowed us to see directly some of the ways Colton students respond to homework assignments and school pressures upon leaving their classrooms. The FAST program is set up in a fairly structured way. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, kids and tutors meet in the school library immediately after the close of the school day. For approximately one hour, they work on student homework. Usually, kids work with the same tutors each session, and the tasks covered vary a lot depending on individual "needs"—needs, that is, which are usually defined by tutors or articulated by teachers and FAST staff.

For the better part of a year, we regularly tutored a fifth-grade girl named Renata. The time we spent with her at FAST also brought us into contact with a number of her classmates and friends, two of whom—Anna and Tanika—we got to know quite well. In addition, we had the opportunity to interact with and provide casual tutoring to several other girls and boys from the program. Finally, with several Colton teachers around during tutoring time, we had the opportunity to watch Renata and other FAST participants interact with them, as well as with their peers and their homework.

Along with spending structured time in these two institutional settings, we also took our research to several more dispersed locations. Spending time in young people's homes and talking with them, their parents and other family members has helped us bring into focus the ways in which homework articulates with family time, family space, family priorities and family dynamics. We visited the homes of three students—Renata and Anna, from the FAST program, and Michelle, a student from Mr. Coleman's class at Woodside—periodically over the entire course of our research. We got to know their families fairly well and had the opportunity to observe household routines and interactions. In addition, we developed substantial passing acquaintance with the families of several other students.

The fourth realm we have been investigating is young people's social worlds. Interviewing and hanging out with kids from Woodside and from FAST in small friendship groups has provided us with a perspective on each of the other three arenas; it has also pointed us toward some of the ways that doing or not doing homework, and the expression of feelings about homework, can be collective, social phenomena. On many occasions and in many places, we talked with young people about the intricacies of their lives. Some of our encounters were planned while others were spontaneous. Kids often, but not always, chose who they would speak to us with. And all the groups we hung out with were gender specific. The groups of boys we met with tended to be relatively ethnically homogeneous—the one from Colton we got to know most well, for example, was comprised of four African-

American kids; often, but not always, the girls' groups crossed cultural, racial and economic distinctions.

Finally, to supplement our research into young people's perspectives, we have conducted interviews with a small number of adults. We met twice with Woodside sixth grade teacher John Coleman. We have also had several formal and informal conversations with the parents of young people from the Woodside class and the FAST tutoring program.

In all, we have engaged upwards of 40 young people in various aspects of our study. Participation has varied considerably in form and intensity. More than 30 of the participants come from Mr. Coleman's 6th grade class. The remainder are or were participants in the FAST program, with the exception of one family who lives in the Colton School neighborhood but whose kids attend a nearby Catholic school. Many of the Woodside and FAST students have been involved in the research to the extent that it came to their classroom or tutoring site; their activities in class projects, classroom homework sessions, or afterschool tutoring activities were observed and noted in fieldworker notes, and occasionally they provided information, offered insights or asked questions of the researcher. The participation of this majority is reflected and recorded in our collected school site fieldnotes, which cover 1 year of classroom and other school observations and approximately 14 months of tutoring participation and observation.

A smaller number of young people became more interested—and more seriously involved—in our study. Approximately 15 or 20 kids from Mr. Coleman's class and FAST took part in extended conversations with us on a wide variety of topics. We conducted both individual and small-group interviews with these young people; formats were usually determined by interviewees' desires and comfort levels. Additionally, topics for the conversations were often proposed, directed or modified by the kids themselves. They included: experiences of schooling, thoughts about teachers, understanding homework and other academic material, why people do and don't do homework assignments, school disciplinary practices, families and home lives, responsibilities, friendships, important people in kids' worlds, cultural backgrounds, race and racism, kids' hopes and dreams, future plans and possibilities, personal and social worries, and what things young people want to learn and know to get along in life. All told, our data includes approximately 20-25 hours of transcribed student interviews.

Additionally, of the 15 or 20 kids who participated in interviews, 10 also invited us into their family, friendship, neighborhood and social worlds. Over the course of the ethnography, in addition to spending time in several school-centered locations—including classrooms, hallways, playground, school library, office, drama room, front steps, tutoring spaces, etc.—we have also observed and talked with kids in their homes, in neighborhood parks, in pizza and ice cream parlors, at the local public swimming pool, at the public library, on walks home from school, and on the residential and commercial streets of their Bay Area urban communities. Our field notes from this aspect of the research detail 10 sessions spent in the households of 4 different families; they also cover 12 months of informal hanging out with kids from the 6th grade classroom and the FAST tutoring program.

Our observations and understandings of kids' experiences around homework and schooling have been complemented, as noted above, by intensive interviews with adult members of 3 families, by 2 extensive conversations with teacher John Coleman, and by informal encounters with other teachers, school personnel, parents and grandparents. The notes and transcripts of these conversations have been included in our project data.

Finally, our data includes artwork from 25 students in Mr. Coleman's 6th grade class; the drawings reflect aspects of how homework fits into these young people's lives. The artwork was produced during a group project which we conducted, with participants' permission, toward the end of our research at Woodside School.

Analysis

Our interest in truly hearing and highlighting kids' concerns, as well as our commitment to understanding the concrete complexities of contemporary school experiences, has led us to approach our analysis of all this data in a grounded and observation-centered manner. As Kathy Charmaz explains in her essay "The Grounded Theory Method: An Explication and Interpretation" (1983),

> the grounded theory method stresses discovery and theory development rather than logical deductive reasoning which relies on prior theoretical frameworks....[B]oth the processes and products of research are shaped from the data rather than from preconceived theoretical frame[s]. (1983: 110)

The understandings we present here concerning young people's experiences of homework, literacy, and schooling have all emerged in interaction and in dialogue with project participants.[2] Both conceptualizations and broader theoretical points, as well as the details of our analysis, stem from our many observations and encounters at the various research sites we have engaged.

In methodological terms, this means that data collection and analysis have proceeded simultaneously and in connection with one another over the entire course of our research. Both have been informed throughout by theory—in particular, theories concerning literacy, learning, and schooling as situated, social practices and theories of education, culture, power and identity—as we will detail in later sections. More importantly, however, our concrete observations and interpretations have informed and shaped each other. As we have collected and analyzed our data, questions and answers, details and frameworks, puzzles and ideas have all arisen together. We have, in fact, deliberately played the different aspects of our work off of one another to deepen our insights and explorations. To a very great extent, then, the interpretive concepts and positions we present in this report reflect what we have observed in our field sites as much as they speak to the literature underlying our project.

Notes on Terminology and Description

We believe that pulling together observation and interpretation in written form is every bit as much a part of the research process as are the practices of data collection, coding, and analysis described above. Thus, in addition to our methodological notes, we would also like to mention two dilemmas of writing with which we have struggled in putting this report together.

The first concerns our general terminology for talking about the participants in our study. Most educational researchers make a practice of referring to the young subjects of their inquiries as "students." Although the individuals involved most centrally in our own project do in obvious ways fit this description, we find the term unsatisfying for general use in our discussions. Primarily, this is because we feel the word "students" is unduly narrow; it evokes only a small portion of people's lives and experiences. Calling someone a "student" emphasizes their school-centered relationships and academic activities, often to the exclusion of family, friendship, community and cultural ties. While in many ways the educational dimensions of kids' lives are central to our research, we want to state clearly—in our language as well as our analysis—that schooling and learning are intimately interwoven with other concerns, contexts and connections.

By and large, then, we do not call our participants "students" except in cases where we wish to distinctly emphasize their classroom roles, positions or relations. Likewise, we generally refrain from using the term "children" except when we wish to situate our subjects with reference to their parents or families. As Barrie Thorne (1993) explains, describing young people as "children" tends to evoke an "adult ideological viewpoint." Sixth graders, Thorne explains, do not call themselves or each other "children"; indeed, they often resist the term because it carries a connotation of condescension, extreme youth, and exclusion from the "grown up" world.

We choose instead to use the terms "young people" and "kids" when describing those whose experiences are at the center of our study. We like the term "young people" because, in paralleling the more generic word "people" often used to refer to adults, it indicates our deep respect for the agency and subjectivity of the individuals with whom we have talked. On the other hand, the word "kids" is the one most commonly used by the school-age participants themselves to refer to individuals and groups.[3] As Thorne explains, the term "kids" has broad applicability and carries a sort of "generational solidarity, a kind of bonding in opposition to adults." (1993: 9) Despite its informality, then, we use this term too, as a sign of taking our participants and their perspectives and categories seriously.

The second dilemma we have faced is still somewhat unresolved for us. It concerns when and how to use ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, gender and other social categories in describing our participants. We certainly recognize the salience of these categories both to our readers and to the kids, teachers and parents involved in the study. In terms of our overall ethnography and analysis, therefore, it is clearly important to discuss these aspects of people's lives thoroughly. Additionally, we are sensitive to the fact that failing to mention people's backgrounds and social positions generally can lead to a false sense of homogeneity. We also believe that mentioning these distinctions *unevenly* tends toward a normalization, where only minority or non-dominant group characteristics get marked, leaving majority and dominant-group positions hidden or presumed.

On the other hand, however, if we include race, culture, gender and class descriptors every time we mention a person or group, as Barrie Thorne points out, we presume or suggest a relevance to these categories which might not hold in every situation. For example, consider the group of kids quoted above about how "you can never just talk about homework." Is it really important to mention (as we did) that they are all girls? What about their ethnicities (which are diverse and, in two cases, complicated to describe) or their social class backgrounds; these are not always obvious and, in this case, they are not directly, or at least not centrally, relevant to the point being highlighted.

Throughout our writing process, we have deliberated in considerable detail about how to resolve these complex and competing concerns. Though we have not come to any final or consistent solutions, we have tried hard to make thoughtful choices in this report about when to include and when not to include certain descriptive information about our participants. It is our hope that the language we have, in the end, employed provides both clarity and respect.

SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF LITERACY AND LEARNING

At the heart of our research questions and research design lies a view of homework which emphasizes social context and connections. As we have detailed above, we understand homework in two interconnected ways: as a *set of texts and literacy-related assignments* given in school for completion at home, and as a *literacy event*, a social practice which moves from place to place and highlights a variety of interactions, choices, struggles and negotiations. As we indicated earlier, this concrete and situated understanding grows in part from our encounters with young people's multifaceted perceptions and experiences. At the same time, our appreciation of homework's social dimensions also reflects several scholarly assumptions about literacy, learning, and schooling which underlie our investigation. We would like to frame and contextualize our ethnographic analysis, which begins in Part 2, by examining these assumptions about the social nature of education and by exploring the theoretical principles on which they rest.

Learning is Social

The way we understand learning has its roots in what are broadly referred to as sociohistorical-, sociocultural- and practice theories. According to these traditions, what people learn and how they think are not universal, innate, structural phenomena. Rather, they are dynamic, social processes. They emerge in activity and interaction. They are historically and contextually situated. And they are constantly evolving.

From an educational perspective, this view of learning can be traced to theoretical analyses developed by L.S. Vygotsky, his colleagues and followers. Such analyses begin with the recognition that human beings are fundamentally social and socially-formed creatures. Our whole human existence, they suggest, has a relational character to it. At every moment, even when individuals seem to be in isolation, people's experiences are caught within webs of social interaction, shared meaning, interpretation, and collective as well as personal histories.

Vygotsky and those who have extended his work argue that the relational qualities of life engender and inform learning. In the sociohistorical terms they have developed, what young people come to understand and know reflects more than simply what unfolds inside their isolated individual minds. Rather, as Vera John-Steiner and her colleagues (1994) explain, thinking is an inextricably linguistic, social and cultural practice. Learning involves a complex and dialectical evolution—of subject and object, knowledge and action, individual and society. It encompasses not only *what* people come to know, but also the many contexts, conversations, processes and relationships which give rise to their varied understandings.

In our own theoretical framework, we view the social character of learning as having several dimensions. First, learning is social because it is mediated by social and cultural forms and forces. As Jerome Bruner explains:

> In understanding the nature and growth of mind in any setting, we cannot take as our unit of analysis the isolated individual operating 'inside one's own skin' in a cultural vacuum. Rather, we must accept the view that the human mind cannot express its nascent powers without the enablement of the symbolic systems of culture. (1992: 246)

These symbolic systems of culture include spoken and written language, as well as number and symbol systems, conventional aesthetics, forms of interpretation, educational frameworks, and modes of representation. (See Wertsch and Kanner, 1992: 333-4 and Cole, 1990: 91) Such systems both facilitate and give rise to thought; they shape understanding. As A.N. Leont'ev (1981b) explains, people learn to participate in society—and in institutions such as schooling—in part by learning to master many shared symbols and tools. These symbols and tools contain within them crystallized forms of social practice. For any individual, then, learning means becoming familiar with culturally-created languages and forms. As well as developing communicative competence, this also involves at least partially appropriating the set of social norms, meanings and values which, in the course of history, particular languages and forms have come to embody.

Second, learning is social because it reflects a shared and social world. According to Geoffrey Saxe (1991), knowledge is always embedded in a variety of interactions and relationships—with other people; with social institutions like education, family and work; and with existing cultural narratives, traditions, hierarchies, and histories. What people learn and understand, therefore, both mirrors and creates a world and a life which they share with those around them. This is true, Leont'ev argues, even for learning which seems to be done alone. Despite its apparent isolation, he points out, even "independent" thought reaches outward, for it is always set within a broader system of social language, concepts, interactions, and power relations. (Leont'ev, 1981a: 47)

Finally, learning is social because, as Jean Lave (1988) explains, it is conducted and constructed in ongoing social, historical activity.

> The point is not so much that arrangements of knowledge in the head correspond in a complicated way to the social world outside the head, but that they are socially organized in such a fashion as to be indivisible. 'Cognition' observed in everyday practice is distributed—stretched over, not divided among—mind, body, activity and culturally organized settings. . . .Everyday activity is . . .a powerful source of socialization. (1988: 1, 14)

Lave goes on to elaborate the nature and importance of activity—that is, the day-to-day things people do—as it relates to learning. Activity, she says, is what orients people in the world; it serves to mediate between human goals and material or social reality. As a result, it gives shape to human understanding. Furthermore, activity is concrete, particular, situated, embodied and always in flux. Thinking and learning, which arise in activity, therefore reflect specific circumstances and practices: where and when and with whom people live; what they have and do not have access to; what they do everyday and in what contexts; how they are treated; and so on. Learning is, consequently, not to be found in fixed or essential sets of qualities, characteristics, functions or structures. It is not something which develops in a preordained, universal manner. Rather, it is open-ended and relational, existing not inside individual people, but among groups of people, and between individuals, groups and the real (shifting, historical) situations which make up their lives.

Perhaps R.P. McDermott (1993) best sums up our understanding of the social character of learning in a provocative essay on the academic labeling of young schoolgoers:

> Learning traditionally gets measured on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their heads. [However,] learning is not in heads, but in the relations between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together and organize a point of contact that allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance....Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part....The question of who is learning what and how much is essentially a question of what conversations they are a part of, and this question is a subset of the more powerful question of what conversations are around to be had in a given culture. (1993: 292, 295)

Literacy is social

Literacy practices, including homework and other education-related activities, figure centrally in the ongoing processes of situated, social learning that characterize young people's school-age years. On one level, they provide much of the important and basic academic content of what kids come to learn and know—that is, the concepts and skills associated with ever-present reading and writing tasks. At the same time, though, these practices also reach beyond their immediate uses, connecting young people with further explorations, proficiencies, understandings, interactions, limitations and possibilities.

For the greater part of the last decade, the Center for the Study of Writing has engaged a broad, sociocultural approach to studying literacy and literacy activities. The approach rests on the theoretical foundations of sociolinguistics and reflects the social and contextual views of learning discussed in the previous section. As Anne Haas Dyson and Sarah Warshauer Freedman (1991) explain in one of the Center's foundational documents, literacy—like learning—always emerges and evolves within concrete activities and with reference to particular contexts and circumstances. Understanding literacy practices and experiences, therefore, is a complex, socially-specific task. It involves more than simply examining isolated written products or identifying the mental processes associated with writing and reading. Instead, such understanding must be centrally concerned to investigate literacy *events*, situations and activities in which, as Shirley Brice Heath notes, "written language is integral to the nature of participants' interactions and their interpretive processes and strategies." (1982: 50)

In general terms, looking at literacy and literacy-learning through this "events" perspective requires recognizing the dynamic and situated nature of reading and writing practices. As Dyson and Freedman point out, following Hymes (1972), literacy events are "characterized by varied components, including setting, participants (senders, recipients), purposes and goals, message form, content, channel, key or tone, and rules governing the sort of talking...that should occur." (Dyson and Freedman, 1991: 5) Understanding how such events unfold in young people's lives means looking at each of these, as well as at the various personal experiences, interactions, and effects which surround literacy activity.

Beyond this, Heath suggests that literacy practices—such as homework—are always positioned in broader social as well as immediate interpersonal situations. In her words:

> Literacy events must...be interpreted in relation to the *larger sociocultural patterns* which they may exemplify or reflect.... Ethnography must describe literacy events in their sociocultural contexts. (1982: 74, emphasis in original)

This is important for a few reasons. As a basic rule of thumb, it acknowledges that all of people's activities and actions relate to more than just their own, local day-to-day experiences; they are as well both shaped by and shapers of a larger society. This larger society includes institutions, ideologies, social values, shared cultural practices, and a multiplicity of individual and group relationships. (See also John-Steiner et al. 1994: 10-13.) In more specific terms, John Gumperz and Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1982) point out that by virtue of the central roles played by literacy activities in learning and communication, these activities are in fact specially positioned in the social and cultural order. As Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz argue, language and communicative processes contribute specifically to "the exercise of power and control and [to] the production and reproduction of social identity." (1982: 1) " Our basic premise, " they argue, is that

> social processes are symbolic processes but that symbols have meaning only in relation to the forces which control the utilization and allocation of environmental resources. We customarily take gender, ethnicity, and class as given parameters and boundaries within which we create our own social identities. The study of language as interactional discourse demonstrates that these parameters are not constants that can be taken for granted but are communicatively produced. Therefore to understand issues of identity and how they affect and are affected by social, political, and ethnic divisions we need to gain insights into the communicative processes by which they arise....We must focus on what communication does...not merely how it is structured. (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982: 1)

It is our objective in this study to investigate such issues of identity, subjectivity, and power in the lives of young people going to school. The ethnographic details and descriptions which follow focus on how these issues play out around the complicated and sometimes contradictory practices of academic homework. At every stage, our work relies on the theoretical insights described in the foregoing discussion. Part 2 of this report features homework as a literacy-based practice involving multiple people, multiple locations, multiple circumstances and multiple agendas. By viewing homework and the learning which surrounds it in this way, we aim to understand and explain three things.

First, we are concerned with the ways in which kids experience education and other aspects of life fitting together. Second, we are interested in how everyday homework, literacy, and schooling practices articulate with long-standing social structures and values—family organization, ideologies of academics, cultural communities and distinctions, the social organization of work, hierarchies of power and privilege, etc. Finally, following the leads of sociocultural theory and sociolinguistic analysis, we hope to show that, for the young people we have worked with throughout our research, literacy and learning practices both reflect and help them to shape their identities and the situations and circumstances around them.

Part 2
HOMEWORK AND SCHOOLING IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES: ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATIONS AND ANALYSIS

EMBEDDED CONTEXTS

It is approximately 3:00 pm on a Tuesday afternoon,.fifteen minutes before the scheduled bell that signals the end of the Woodside Elementary school day. Mr. Coleman strolls to the front chalkboard in his classroom and begins writing:

Reading—Study voc. words
    Read up to p. 46—Night Journey

Math—Return p. 444
    Comp. today's assignment p. 135
    Practice p. 56

Study Poem

Students, meanwhile, stuff books and papers into backpacks, chat casually with friends, and slip into sweaters or jackets. It is "homework" time in the 6th grade and, as is the case every afternoon, Mr. Coleman speaks about the upcoming night's assignments over a din of student voices and concerns. Some of the young people in the classroom focus their attention directly on Mr. Coleman, occasionally shouting questions to him from their seats about the homework. Others scribble a note or two on a scrap of paper and tuck the paper inside their math book or stuff it into the pocket of their jeans. Some kids continue conversing and/or preparing for the afternoon, seemingly oblivious to both Mr. Coleman's verbal comments and the written instructions on the board.

For between five and ten minutes, Mr. Coleman issues reminders about math and English activities. The comments he makes remain fairly general—a catalogue of what needs to be accomplished rather than an explanation of specific tasks. He provides no new instructions or concepts. His expectations, instead, appear to have a "self-evident" quality or to refer to previous work: the request to read from *Night Journey*, for example, is part of an ongoing class reading project, and the evening's math and vocabulary assignments call upon ties to lessons from earlier in the day.

When Mr. Coleman finishes listing all the assignments on the chalkboard, he begins walking from desk to desk distributing copies of the poem "Dreams" by Langston Hughes, which he has said he wants the kids to memorize by Friday. Every now and then, he stops in front of a student:

> "Jared, you're not listening. How you going to do your homework if you aren't listening?"
>
> "Angela, what book are you taking home?"
> Angela looks up. "Math"
> "Also get your reading. You didn't finish your reading."
>
> "Tony, make sure you *do* something for yourself tonight."

Despite Mr. Coleman's periodic and pointed concerns, the overall tone in the room is fairly light; the air contains a palpable feel of transition from work to play. One boy takes out a stack of baseball cards and shows it to the other boys at his table. Several girls produce hair brushes or lip gloss from their bags and start conversations about their own or each other's appearances. A Nintendo electronic game appears and gets passed around in one mixed-gender cluster. The words "drama," "basketball," "babysitting," and "I'll call you" float above the general murmur. Mr. Coleman and most of the students are smiling.

As the 3:15 bell rings, Mr. Coleman raises his voice a few notches: "Don't forget to do everything on the board. See you tomorrow." There is a quick rustling of bags and scraping of chairs as thirty-some young people make their way to and through the classroom door.

As these sixth-graders—indeed as students in most classrooms most of the time—leave school, a variety of daily homework obligations leave (or in some cases, do not leave) with them. Over the course of an afternoon and evening, as these obligations ride from place to place in student bags and travel from one realm to another in young people's minds, they touch many contexts and concerns. We have already mentioned some of the arenas in and around which homework flows; in addition to schooling and learning, there are home and family, friends, community, self perception, race, ethnicity and culture, gender, and a sense of orientation toward personal and social futures. In following kids and homework around, we have been interested by the ways in which kids exercise control over their work as they navigate through these contexts, and by the questions they raise about both homework and schooling in different situations.

We would like to examine three homework-related concerns, which young people brought up while talking with us, to highlight the complicated multiplicity of kids' lives. These kid-centered concerns cut across realms of meaning and interaction; in doing so, they suggest two things: that young people's understandings of homework and school vary with their experiences, and that many different aspects of kids' worlds are continually in collaboration and tension with one another.

Concern #1: Dilemmas of Understanding

Michelle is a 12-year-old, middle class African-American student from Mr. Coleman's 6th grade class who spoke with us numerous times and in great depth about our project. One afternoon over pizza, the researcher she was with asked her what she would do if she were in charge of our study. She replied that she would try to find out what people do when they do not understand or "get stuck" on a homework assignment. Specifically, she posed the following dilemma:

> What if you went home and had something that you had to do in your homework and you had just learned about it but you had forgot, and your mom didn't know about it because the way they did it back then was different, and you didn't have the phone number and your teacher wasn't at school, and you didn't have anybody to call...what would you do?

Our experiences talking with Michelle and others, and especially our work in the FAST after-school tutoring program, have shown us that this type of concern with not understanding one's homework is both widespread and well-founded. For many kids—including Renata, Anna, Tanika and others in FAST, as well as Michelle and many of her classmates—homework assignments can be difficult, puzzling, unclear, stressful and anxiety-producing. Michelle's resolution to the problem she posed above is quite interesting, and we will return to it at the end of this section. First, however, we would like to explore some of the struggles young people have with homework and to look at how kids address, understand and deal with these challenges.

In general, young people's difficulties with homework span a range of variations and evoke a variety of feelings and responses. In Michelle's case, for instance, problems are intermittent but not insignificant. They cover several different types. To begin with, Michelle sometimes finds it hard to understand in simple terms what the often convoluted instructions given in textbooks or on worksheets want from her. Once she surmounts that problem, if she ever does, she may then also face subject-specific difficulties related to remembering the math processes, social studies material, or other information called for in the assignments.

Sometimes, as a result of one or both of these problems, Michelle is unsure of whether she is doing what she is supposed to do on her homework—and if she is, of whether she is doing it right. Being the sort of student who wants to complete her assignments consistently and in acceptable fashion, Michelle finds the occasions on which she faces such challenges disturbing; they cause her both self-doubt and anxiety. The doubt she feels concerns internal matters of intelligence or competence. Is she smart enough to do this work? Are other kids understanding this stuff while she sits here agonizing? Can she find a way to figure out what she needs to do? The anxiety, on the other hand, relates to external consequences; in particular, she worries that she will receive a bad grade or criticism if she brings incomplete work back to Mr. Coleman's classroom.

Michelle's experience of periodic struggle with homework is fairly common among the kids in our study. Homework difficulties vary, however, and Renata's case provides a more extreme example of how they can arise and pervade young people's lives. As we explained earlier, Renata is a 5th grader from the FAST program at Colton School. In addition, she comes from a relatively low-income family, and she identifies as mixed ethnically; her mother, with whom she lives, is African American and her father, with whom she rarely has contact, is white. In Renata's academic experience, problems with homework are a daily burden, rather than an occasional obstacle, as they are for Michelle. This has become evident to us as, for nearly a year, Renata has worked on her homework every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon with Amy Scharf, who is her FAST tutor. During these tutoring sessions, Renata almost always asks several rounds of questions and explanations before proceeding. Partly, this is due to the fact that she feels she has trouble reading. Because of this difficulty, she often avoids or ignores the written directions of an assignment. Instead, she relies on her instincts and memories from class, as well as on her tutor's explanations to help her determine what it is that she will do. When Renata is around other students at FAST, she is also inclined to check with friends or classmates for information about her work. These strategies sometimes help, but do not always give her the confidence to tackle homework endeavors.

In addition to Renata's difficulties with the literacy aspects of homework, she also encounters on a regular basis all the challenges of deciphering instructions, remembering teachers' comments, and figuring out how to answer particular questions that Michelle occasionally faces. There is little that comes easily to her in the homework arena; sitting down to do afternoon or evening assignments always brings some stress, frustration, guesswork, and self-doubt. As a result of all this, when Renata puts her mind to her assignments, she—unlike Michelle—is often more concerned with getting *something* down on her paper than with doing a detailed or thoroughly "accurate" job. And, because even this is not always possible, she does not generally let herself get emotionally invested in thinking about homework or in worrying about its intricacies or consequences.

Between and beyond these two cases lies a whole continuum of homework understanding. In every class we have visited, there is a (usually broad) range of experiences and difficulties with homework activities. While some kids struggle with every question and every problem on every page, other students breeze through, even enjoy, the tasks they are assigned by their teachers at the end of each school day.

Within a classroom such as Mr. Coleman's, or the one Renata is in, adhering to uniform expectations about homework despite the acknowledged fact that not all kids can or will meet them[4] continually creates, reinforces and compounds academic differences. As Michelle and others point out, sometimes not understanding homework assignments can get kids "behind in school."

Furthermore, because daily schoolwork cumulates, those who get "behind" tend to stay behind and fall farther behind.[5]

This situation is compounded by the fact that homework is not only about content but also about discipline. Students who for whatever reason cannot or do not complete their homework on a regular basis are often identified by Mr. Coleman as "problem kids" or troublemakers.[6] The disciplinary treatment they receive as a result—which may include loss of "privileges," lack of trust, intense surveillance by teachers, notes or phone calls to adult caretakers, negative evaluations on report cards, and so on—frequently creates (or reinforces) a desire to resist school responsibilities. As we will explain in later sections, this resistance and the alienation that accompanies it may also—and relatedly—derive from incompatibilities of culture, class and language between these so-called "problem students," on the one hand, and teachers, classrooms, and schools, on the other. (See, for example, Delpit, 1988; Heath, 1982 and 1983; and Fordham, 1988.) Whatever the nexus of reasons, however, opting out of school obligations as a result of disciplinary measures usually means avoiding or ignoring further homework. This, as the kids themselves know, can feed back into and perpetuate their original struggles and difficulties. It can also, as a result, sustain and reproduce the cycle of discipline which led to the alienation and resistance in the first place.[7]

As Michelle insightfully explained to us after posing the conundrum from the beginning of this section, kids who do not understand their assignments are faced with a number of complicated realities, situations and choices which lead them to develop certain strategies and attitudes around homework. Given the emotional, practical and academic effects mentioned above, one of the major choices facing someone who is having difficulty is whether or not to seek help, and if so, from whom and to what ends.

For some young people, friends provide the first line of assistance in times of homework trouble. Such is the case for Sonia and Amanda, two students from Mr. Coleman's class. Sonia and Amanda have been close friends all during their 6th grade year, and they do many things together both at school and at home. Their backgrounds are similar, though not identical: Amanda comes from a middle-class Asian-American family; Sonia's background is (upper) middle class and bicultural, with her father being Chinese-American and her mother being white. Both girls' families have strong spiritual and religious ties. Both families also encourage their daughters to excel in school—which the girls do.[8]

Whether or not they actually have difficulties on any given day, Sonia and Amanda regularly consult with each other by phone about homework assignments and other school matters. Most of the time, they both understand the homework they are supposed to do and even enjoy their (often collective) efforts at completing it. On a few occasions, troubles arise for one or the other of them, and the girls strategize and problem-solve together, persevering until they have worked through all questions and they both feel comfortable proceeding. For Amanda and Sonia, this type of friend-to-friend collaboration is nearly always sufficient to clear them of homework hurdles. It tends to not only see them through immediate problems but also to deepen their understanding of, and often their interest in, material from school.

Anna and Tanika, two students from the FAST program at Colton Middle School, also chat with each other at times about homework and about the difficulties they have with it. These two girls, like Sonia and Amanda, are good friends—"best friends," as they have explained—and they are very involved in all aspects of each other's lives. In addition to spending a great deal of their school time together, Anna and Tanika usually talk on the phone several times each afternoon. They also frequently visit and hang out at each other's houses. Both girls come from working class African American families, and over the course of our project they have gone through their 4th and 5th grade years.

During their time in the 4th grade (year 1 of our project), Tanika and Anna were in the same class at Colton. As we will explain later, animosity with their teacher led the two girls to choose *not* to do all their homework for that class. On the occasions that they did work on their assignments, though—and especially during FAST tutoring sessions—they commonly asked each other for help when they ran into difficulties. This academic collaboration has lessened somewhat during Anna's and Tanika's 5th grade year, due to the fact that they have been placed in separate classes; their friendship has continued, however, and once in a while they do still ask each other for input on homework.

The specific type of help these girls ask for and receive from one another is often shaped by the fact that *both* of them face considerable struggles with the instructions and tasks of their assignments. In contrast to Sonia and Amanda's confident sharing of ideas and information, the assistance that Anna and Tanika offer each other in times of doubt usually stems less from any sure-footed understanding of questions or skill processes than from one or the other person's best guess about how to proceed with a given piece of work. When Tanika and Anna get stuck on a reading, writing or calculating task, they work together to find *some* way to approach it; they then use this approach to push each other through the work until it appears complete. Along the way, the two girls frequently complain and commiserate together about unreasonable expectations. They are also each inclined to take the other's word on anything they do not understand themselves. Finally, if putting their heads together is not enough to figure out a question or problem, both girls will often skip or ignore the issue—or they will simply take a common, if also uncertain, guess.

On occasion, when Anna and Tanika do not understand some aspect of their homework, they take their concerns to another arena of assistance: the realm of families. This is especially true when they are completing their assignments at home, rather than during FAST or other tutoring sessions on the Colton premises. In their particular case, the preferred family helper is Yvette, Anna's 14-year-old sister.[9] Both girls look up to Yvette, and, when she is around to help them out, they take her comments and suggestions seriously. Within Anna's family, homework routines are generally said to revolve around mutual effort and assistance; it is, in fact, an unspoken house rule that, when requested, each of the four children will help their younger siblings with schoolwork difficulties. In practice, this mutuality is meditated by sibling relationships and rivalries. For Anna, this means that, although she has two older sisters, she is only ever willing to ask one of them for assistance. Her 11-year-old sister Jackie, for example, is not even on her map of possible helpers; the high level of competition and animosity they feel with each other (due, perhaps, to their closeness in age) makes the relationship too intense to show "weakness" or ask for support.

While, as a younger sibling, Anna asks for and receives periodic help with her homework— from Yvette at least, even if not from Jackie—as an older sibling, she also provides academic support and encouragement to her younger brother Kevin, who is two years younger than she is. Mostly, Anna helps Kevin with math problems; she feels most comfortable with her skills in this area. When Tanika is at the Thompson house, she joins Anna in both asking for and providing homework-related assistance.

In many ways, homework advice circulates freely among the young people— siblings and friends— in Anna Thompson's household. Because most of the kids struggle to some degree with school-related tasks and understandings, the help is not always a hundred percent "accurate" according to teachers' standards; it is nonetheless welcome to those who seek it. In cases where disputes arise or where young people alone can find no satisfactory solutions to their questions, Anna's mother Marjorie can be called upon to provide "adult" guidance. By the accounts of her children, Marjorie is usually able to push whoever is stuck beyond their difficulties; however, because she is extremely busy—she has a job as a cosmetologist, she takes classes at the local community college, and she cares for her four children as a single parent—Marjorie is often not consulted.

For other young people, parents are the first, the most important, and/or the only place to go when homework problems set in. This is true, for example, in the Reed family, a middle class African American family from the Colton School neighborhood, whose two children now attend Catholic school. As Torrie, age 10, and Randy, age 8, explained to us in an interview:

> Torrie: Sometimes [homework is] hard but sometimes its easy. When you understand it, it's easy, when you don't understand it, it's hard.
>
> AS (interviewer): If you don't understand it, what do you do?
>
> Torrie: I go to my mom or my dad.
>
> AS: And they help you?
>
> Torrie: Yeah, sometimes, if they're not tired.
>
> AS: Are there ever times when you can't get help or they don't understand what you're supposed to do?
>
> Torrie: Yeah.
>
> AS: And then what do you do, just stop or...
>
> Torrie: No, I still do it. I just find out a way.
>
> [..]
>
> AS: What about you, Randy?

Randy: I do it all.

AS: What happens if you have trouble with yours?

Randy: I ask my parents.

AS: Do you guys ever ask each other?

Randy: I guess...Sometimes I ask my sister.

As their mother Linda elaborates, homework in the Reed household is a highly valued and visible activity. Linda, a substitute teacher and active PTA parent, and her husband Richard, a lawyer, place a high premium on education and have created an environment for their children which emphasizes the joys of learning and the importance of academic persistence. Every afternoon, in response to their parents' overall encouragement, Torrie and Randy bring their school assignments and set up at the dining room table. During their work time, Linda comes by periodically to check on how they are faring. According to Linda's own explanations, she supervises her children's homework for two reasons—to guarantee that Torrie's and Randy's assignments are completed, and to make sure that the kids' work is done with care and understanding. All this, she notes, requires a great deal of effort. Consequently, while she feels it is important to do—and to do consistently—Linda echoes Torrie's observation (above) that she is not always terribly enthusiastic about the task or the responsibility.

AS (interviewer): So you try to help the kids every day?

> Linda: Yes. And it's not always fun. I don't want you to think I am the greatest mother in the world. Sometimes I'm tired and I don't want to help with the homework. So it's: "Go away, wait for your daddy to get home." Or "I can't do this." Mostly, what I try to do is, I try to make sure that *I'm* not tired. You can't do homework when you are tired, and yelling and screaming. That happens when you're too busy or have stuff on your mind....A lot of times, my kids can do their own homework. They can do it all by themselves. [Still,] I check all

> homework that goes out of this house. I check everything. I tell them, "We're paying, I'm checking." It lets me know what's going on in the classroom. Even though I have a role at the school, I want specifics. So I know what they're doing, and I know if they're breezing through something, I can try and teach more. Or I can say that book is *too easy*, and you have to get another book.

From the perspective of teachers and schools, parents like the Reeds set the standard for involvement in young people's homework activities. As Woodside instructor John Coleman explains, educators not only *hope* students will get help on homework from their parents; they *expect* that adult family members will provide information and guidance when kids have difficulty. "If you don't understand, ask someone at home," Mr. Coleman encourages the class. "Your parents are smart people. They've been through school. Ask them to help you study."[10]

Despite such teacher suggestions, and despite the range of people in their lives, it is still not possible for all kids to find the help they need when they get stuck on homework projects or questions. In a number of cases, like those of Michelle or Renata for example, marshaling assistance can in fact be quite difficult. Friends are often unavailable or hard to contact or unable to provide the necessary information. And, as McDermott et. al. (1984) note, even with the best of intentions, not all parents or families have the same ability to ensure their children's completion of or success on intricately-defined homework tasks. Literacy and other academic demands and opportunities are distributed differentially within communities. As a result, these differential demands and opportunities lead to an uneven distribution of academic resources in families. In the words of McDermott and his colleagues:

> Homework assignments do not exist in a vacuum, and there are clear reasons, at the level of both community and family organization, for their mixed reception. Homework takes time and academic skill, two resources that are systematically organized differentially across our communities. The indiscriminate assignment of homework against

> such a background can exacerbate the sorting dilemmas of our school system. (p. 407)

On some level, the young people involved in our project are aware of all this, and they realize the potential consequences associated with doing and not doing, understanding and not understanding, homework. Michelle, for example, has raised many insightful concerns in discussing with us her own struggles and strategies around completing homework. In particular, we were interested in how she herself resolves the dilemma cited at the beginning of this section; we asked her, given her complex reality and her desire to do well in school, how she personally deals with not understanding aspects of her homework. Her response pinpoints a complicated nexus of family, school and personal pressures which inform each other and shape her experiences.

> Well, I'd probably wait until the next day and in the morning ask the teacher to go over it with me and then I'd find out the answer myself, but basically if my parents couldn't get it then I guess I'd just have to think hard about it and then probably come up with the answer.

Michelle's ambivalence about whether it is in fact okay to skip something if she cannot do it suggests to us that, in someone's eyes (her parents, her teacher's, her own, or perhaps ours), she never wants to be or to appear irresponsible or incapable. When we pressed her on this point, she described a kind of slippery slope which begins with letting an assignment here or there go and ends in academic ruin.

> AS (interviewer): Do you ever say 'Forget it, it doesn't matter'?
>
> Michelle: No, because if I forget about it, then I'll never know. If I keep doing that with my homework — 'Oh, forget it' ... some kids do forget about it and they say it doesn't matter, but they do get graded on it, and when their report card comes, they wonder, 'How come I got so low on

> that?' But my parents want me to do good in school and get good grades and stuff. So I work hard and try my best even when I don't understand.

Concern #2: Negotiating homework and other responsibilities

Whatever individuals' level of understanding on school-sent [literacy] tasks, and however they find or do not find the resources to help them with their assignments, almost all of the young people we have talked with offer a broader view of what it is they need to do than schools usually admit. In particular, many point out that "homework" in their lives involves more than formal educational endeavors.

Children's responsibilities in families and communities cover a broad range: from household chores to going along on parents' errands, from caring for siblings to assisting sick or injured family members, from taking part in church events to "working" with parents or local organizations. Many kids and parents point out that young people—especially, but not exclusively, girls—are often quite involved in the day-to-day running of their households.[11] They straighten bedrooms, wash dishes, sweep floors, help with shopping and cooking, assist grandparents, babysit siblings and cousins, do chores for neighbors, help out with parents' jobs, and take care of a number of spontaneous crises and needs. In addition, a few kids have told us over the course of our research that they put a lot of time and energy into dealing with more intimate family matters and family problems. While most of them speak somewhat abbreviatedly about the specifics of these home-based concerns, the general issues on their minds include: mediating family relationships, dealing with step-parents or the leaving and return of often-absent parents, frequent changes of residence, conflicts with siblings or other household members, harsh or seemingly-arbitrary punishments and restrictions, illness and, in a few cases, even deaths.

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Young people also cultivate involvements and activities in their neighborhoods and communities; many participate extensively, for example, in church activities, local babysitting circles, recreation and sports programs, and community youth projects.

Although teachers and school hold up homework as something to be valued and prioritized above all other activities and concerns[12], from young people's perspectives, all these engagements contribute to a sense that afternoon and evening times are not simply extensions of the school day; they involve instead meeting a variety of obligations, juggling many different responsibilities and desires, and negotiating a number of relationships.

The work children do in their families and communities—a second kind of "homework"—is often as important, if not more important to them than the homework they do for school. As several students themselves have told us, they particularly draw a great deal of support, learning, love and security from home. As a result, they feel that it is important to give back to their families as much time and effort as they can. Integrating the disparate contexts to which they belong, and weighing their relative significances, can be a complicated endeavor for young people. The following two excerpts, taken from different group interviews, suggest some of the ways in which kids deliberate about these questions.

Excerpt 1 (Students from Woodside)

> AS (interviewer): Which is more important, schoolwork or homework?
>
> Gina: Not homework, housework. Because the homework just affects your grades, but housework is going to affect your butt...because if you don't do it, you can't go outside...

> Michelle: I think homework is more important, because when you do your homework you learn more and the more you learn the more higher grades you go up and then you get into college and then you get a job and then you get money to buy a house.
>
> Gina: But if you don't do your chores then you don't get paid...You didn't do that you can't go outside. You didn't do that, no TV...

This exchange emerges from a larger interview segment during which Gina, Michelle and two other girls from their Woodside classroom are discussing with us their respective educational and family obligations. The girls explain that the daily homework they receive from school usually includes some sort of reading and writing work, a page of math problems, and a longer-term assignment, such as studying for a future test or working on a project. In addition to these school-based tasks, Michelle and Gina detail the various household chores for which they are responsible: cleaning their rooms and bathrooms, doing dishes, sorting laundry, and generally helping out around their homes. Some days, the girls say, there is enough time, space, energy and interest for all of their "work" to get done. Other days, however, emotional concerns, physical distractions, a lack of motivation, or an especially heavy workload forces them to prioritize—and sometimes choose between—academic and household responsibilities.

The divergent priorities and choices that Gina and Michelle articulate in their opinions here reflect different decision-making strategies, different circumstances, and different concerns. Most notably, the girls call upon differing time frameworks as they weigh the relative importance of homework and housework in their lives. Gina, on the one hand, is concerned primarily with the "here and now." In emphasizing the importance of household responsibilities over school tasks, she appeals to relatively short-term or immediate goals: going outside, getting paid (i.e. getting her weekly "allowance"), and being allowed to watch TV. Her interest in these things speaks to a desire for personal and ongoing control over her actions and activities. Gina wants to do what *she* deems necessary on a day-to-day basis, and she wants the freedom to play and enjoy herself as she sees fit. Gina's orientation toward the present also speaks to a desire for steady security in her family life; as she explains, the choice to emphasize housework over homework is aimed not only at maintaining a sense of fun but also at protecting against parental disapproval, anger or punishment. "[T]he homework," she says, "just affects your grades, but housework is going to affect your butt."

If Gina bases her comparative assessment of homework and housework on *immediate* concerns such as maximizing enjoyment, preserving daily privileges, and avoiding family conflict, Michelle bases her deliberations about these same issues on more [distant] desires. In weighing the significance of academic and family responsibilities, Michelle focuses on *long-term* goals such as going to college, getting a job, and having money to buy a house.[13]

For Michelle, the chain which leads from doing homework to having a successful life "later on" has clear links; it is linear, definite, and all laid out.

> ...[W]hen you do your homework, you learn more and the more you learn the more higher grades you go up and then you get into college and then you get a job and then you get money to buy a house.

Of course, this is not to say that homework is without its disagreeable aspects; as we explained earlier, for Michelle, some assignments are very hard and unpleasant to do. Still, what she articulates in this conversation is a sense that, despite the frustrations, doing her homework is ultimately worth the effort and short-run sacrifices it requires. Michelle expects that, whether or not she finds assignments useful and relevant in the present, she will benefit from her homework endeavors when she grows up. [14] This attitude, and Michelle's ability to act on the priorities it embraces, is facilitated by a strong family commitment to education. Michelle's parents agree with the opinions she states here and, as Michelle herself explains, they generally encourage and enable her to complete her daily school-sent responsibilities.

Excerpt 2 (Students from FAST Program at Colton)

> AS (interviewer): If all this stuff is work—your homework that you have to do and all the stuff that you have to do around the house, which is more important?
>
> Miles: The stuff around the house...
>
> Latoya: Helping your parents...
>
> Elizabeth: I couldn't really compare...My father said like 'If *I'm* sick and I'm laying on this bed, there will always be someone to help me. But you don't always get a second chance in life to go back to school and do well in the things you didn't do.' I believe in getting my school work done. And my Grandma's around to help my Daddy.
>
> AS: What about you guys who said that helping out your family is more important, how come ?
>
> Miles: You can do your school work anytime, but your parents need more help. 'Cause they're older than you and they can die any time.
>
> Mark: It's better to help out your parents. Helping your parents is better, because if you don't help them you don't get no food, and they probably won't let you stay and be mean to you...unless they really care about you...They'd probably kick you out.
>
> Latoya: And after your parents die, if you don't have a job, how are you going to live?

For these fourth graders from the FAST tutoring program, the issues involved in integrating and prioritizing afternoon obligations bear a deeper intensity than the concerns about TV, playing outside, collecting allowance, and overall school success voiced by Michelle and Gina above. The questions with which Elizabeth, Miles, Mark and Latoya struggle address many serious and intimate needs, feelings, fears, and hopes; for these young people, mediating between homework and household responsibilities involves grappling with issues at the very heart of their emotional and social survival.

Consider, for example, Elizabeth's experience. As she speaks, she alludes to "'If [my dad's] sick and...laying on this bed...." For her, this is not simply idle musing; as she explains in the section of the interview just prior to the one quoted, her father has recently been in a serious automobile accident during which he sustained major injuries to his legs, torso, lungs, head, mouth and jaw. Ever since the accident—about a month, Elizabeth says—he has been bedbound, unable to move without difficulty, unable to eat solid foods, and in need of fairly constant family care. Elizabeth describes her father's condition in graphic and medically-specific detail. She has obviously been spending a lot of time with him; clearly, his health and well-being capture a great deal of her family's emotional and practical attention.

Despite Elizabeth's contention that she "couldn't compare" her family and school responsibilities, it is clear from her comments here that she does, in fact, find herself negotiating between and among different priorities. As she explains them, these priorities include: spending time with her father, helping take care of her father's needs, helping her mother with the routine household tasks that sometimes get eclipsed by her father's care schedule, and Elizabeth's own homework and school responsibilities.

On the whole, Elizabeth says she takes pleasure in homework and school, and under other circumstances she would most likely value her homework time and obligations on grounds of pure enjoyment. The nature and severity of her family's situation, however, have disrupted her usual framework for choosing afternoon activities. While the outcome of her analysis about homework and "family work" remains the same as it might have been if there were no family emergency (i.e. she still says homework is a top priority), Elizabeth's current deliberations appear to reflect, as much as anything, her search for a response to her father's accident. On the one hand, because of his fragile condition and her own fears and feelings about it, Elizabeth wants to stay with her father as much as possible. She draws comfort from being near him and feels that her practical and emotional help really do make a difference. On the other hand, despite his own injuries and needs, Elizabeth's father conveys a strong interest in her education and future; he wants her to do well in school. This attitude of encouragement clearly affects both Elizabeth's thoughts and her actions. As she suggests in the above quote, her choice to value homework under the present circumstances is an effort to honor her father. She primarily focuses on education neither to escape family realities nor to ward off negative school consequences. Rather, for her, doing homework is one way among many to make the father she loves happy and proud

The depth of feeling in Elizabeth's story is matched in the experiences of the other young people quoted in Excerpt 2 above. Miles, for example, tells us sadly during the interview that a year or two ago, his own father died after a somewhat extended illness. Miles explains that he saw his father through hospital stays and several rounds of medication, and that this was extremely hard and painful for him. For many months, sadness and fear, illness and death, dominated his life and his consciousness. And even now, a year or so later, he is still clearly shaken by painful feelings and memories.

In a sense, this experience silently underlies Miles' resolution of the family work versus homework question: "You can do your school work anytime," he says, "but your parents need more help. 'Cause they're older than you and they can die any time."

Mark and Latoya articulate somewhat different concerns in their decisions to prioritize household responsibilities over the literacy tasks they bring home every day from school. By contrast to Elizabeth's and Miles' considerations, the issues these kids raise are set, not in the realm of severe and unexpected family traumas, but in the routine and persistent dilemmas of urban poverty and urban life.

> Mark: It's better to help out your parents. Helping your parents is better, because if you don't help them you don't get no food, and they probably won't let you stay and be mean to you...unless they really care about you...They'd probably kick you out.
>
> Latoya: And after your parents die, if you don't have a job, how are you going to live?

At the root of all these concerns is a multifaceted fear—fear of not having enough, fear of parents' anger or disavowal, fear of having nowhere to turn, fear of not being able to survive. In particular, Mark speaks of a perceived need to "earn his keep" around the house, perhaps to help ensure that there will be enough food—and care—to go around. And Latoya echoes his worries, emphasizing the importance of, on the one hand, keeping her parents safe and healthy and, on the other, knowing how to take care of herself, how to get by.

The parameters of young people's home-school deliberations and the specific choices and compromises they have to make thus grow out of the contexts and circumstances in which they live. In some families, for instance, doing school homework is considered the children's main family responsibility. As parent Linda Reed explains:

> This is the way that my husband and I think of it. School is [the kids'] job. My husband is an attorney, that is his job and my job is to see that everything functions the way that it is supposed to....Torrie and Randy know what they have to do, and this year we started to give them more chores around the house. If for some reason, it looks like they are doing too much, then we will cut back because school is the most important thing for them to be doing. If Torrie is supposed to wash the dishes, and she has homework to do, I will wash the dishes. But when they come home, they do their homework first.

In other families, while children's school assignments are valued and time is at least theoretically "set aside" for them, household obligations, responsibilities and routines frequently weave in and around studying. In such cases, as our observations suggest, repeated requests for kids' attention are not uncommon. During "homework time," young people may be asked to watch younger siblings or neighbors, go along on family members' errands, help parents with various small household tasks, visit with relatives who drop by, etc. As a result, their work often gets stretched and fragmented over extended periods of time; under such circumstances, even a brief assignment can end up taking all afternoon to complete.

Finally, some families face unpredicted crises or routinely depend directly on children (especially oldest children or oldest girls) to keep everything running smoothly. Under these circumstances, school work can be both an impediment and a pressure. As we heard from Elizabeth and Miles, as well as from a few of the Woodside Elementary students, weighty obligations at home—caring in a sustained way for siblings and cousins, maintaining a clean house, planning and preparing daily meals, responding to family health problems, dealing with emergencies, mediating family conflicts, etc.—can mean that young people have neither time nor space to do homework assignments. While in some ways these kids know that their parents want them to do well in school (many of the kids themselves also expressed desires to do well in school), within the overall context of their families, other things are frequently of more pressing concern. Indeed, more often than not, homework "gets in the way" of doing what they or their parents most need or want them to do. As a result, the homework usually does not get completed.

Concern #3: Critiques of Schooling

From young people's perspectives, then, fitting homework into life involves pushing boundaries of understanding, gathering support and assistance, and negotiating different needs, desires, obligations and responsibilities. In addition, for many students, thoughts and choices about homework are embedded as well in two further concerns: their broader understanding of education and their particular, situated experiences of learning and schooling.

We first noticed this dynamic while talking to a group of four boys from the FAST Program at Colton. Early in the conversation, the boys—two African-Americans, one Mexican-American and one Salvadoran—told us that they hated homework and rarely, if ever, did any. They also explained that Mr. Wilder, their (white) teacher, labeled them as "troublemakers" and often blamed them for classroom disruptions and school problems. Behaviorally, these boys all feel picked on, as though the school treats them oppositionally rather than supportively. In addition, their feelings about school touch on cultural issues and have not only individual, but also group dimensions.[15]

One brief interchange which broke out spontaneously during the course of the discussion highlights some salient aspects of these kids' thoughts and experiences. It began with a question:

> Marcus: Hey, have you ever figured out how teachers be teachin' us about...how they don't teach us about—our backgrounds? They teach us about, like, Abraham Lincoln and all them—but they don't...like *us*...like Carlos, he's Mexican and they don't teach him

about Mexicans or about his background...they don't teach us about being black and stuff....

The other three immediately jumped on this topic, and everyone began to talk at once.

David: They want us to be what they is.

Carlos: The *Arabian* people, man that's stupid. How come we don't talk about Malcolm X or somethin'?

Marcus: And like the Greeks: It ain't nobody in our class is Greek, nobody. And that's all we do...

AS (interviewer): What would you *rather* learn?

Marcus: About my culture, my background. Like, you know, let's do book reports on...(he pauses to think)

Carlos: (finishing his sentence)....Martin Luther King or somethin'.

David: Like we were taught to find out about our great-great-grandparents and all that, but we have to get *certain* information. We couldn't get our own. We had to have what he [Mr. Wilder] *wanted* us to have.

Tony: The weekly reader was talking about that El Salvador was really poor, that...

Marcus: And they don't teach *him* about that....They don't care about your background. They want to brainwash you with their culture so you can, you know...

Carlos:...Turn you into them *white* people.

At this point, three pairs of eyes glanced quickly at Amy Scharf, the white interviewer.

Others: Carlos!

Marcus: I don't got no offense against white people.

David: They just want us to grow up bein' what they is.

With this exchange, Marcus, David, Carlos and Tony pull together a list of school experiences which they find exclusionary and unproductive; in doing so, they give voice to a collective anger which reflects their encounters with classroom practices and interactions. On a more analytical level, the boys also generate a multifaceted critique—of curriculum, teachers, and the structure of school in general. At the core of this critique is the students' contention that their educations are not teaching them what they most want to learn and know. They charge that the materials included in history textbooks and weekly readers is not connected to them, and that much is missing from what they are taught in the classroom: their culture, their backgrounds, what they know. This leads to a second issue. It is not just that these kids wish they were learning something else; they feel that the curriculum and discipline they *do* come in contact with silences and invalidates them. Finally, the boys do not limit their critique to a simple naming of what is missing. They explain as well what they consider to be the object of the omissions: brainwashing. In their view, the school neither accepts nor respects them for who they are. It seeks to change them. As David says, "[Teachers] want us to grow up bein' what they is." While "what they is" has both class and cultural ramifications, here it specifically comes to be defined as being about race—"to turn you into them white people." In general, these students feel that to be educated by the school is to face a loss: of community, history, culture, and racial identity.[16]

Marcus, David, Carlos and Tony—as well as many other students of color we spoke with—long intensely for recognition and relevant educational knowledge instead of this sense of loss. Michelle explains how this dynamic plays out and affects members of her class at Woodside:

> Michelle: We're just not reading white history....We're reading about white *rich* history. That's what one of the rappers said on television....He said that you're not just reading "history".... [W]hen you say that, you make it sound like you're not reading anything. But

> you're not getting enough black things....[T]he way it is now...we're reading about Egypt and I really think that we should be reading about ourselves.
>
> AS (interviewer): What would count as studying about yourselves?
>
> Michelle: I believe more African-American history and then Mexican history and then other cultures besides....Like they're teaching right now about what's happened in Egypt 200 B.C., around that time, and I think more students want to learn about what's happening now in America instead of way back, because a lot of kids...they don't like their social studies.

More than anything else, these young people express a desire to learn in an environment which values and reflects, rather than denigrates, them, one which speaks their language and responds to their styles, questions, expressions and experiences. For many of them, including Marcus, David, Carlos and Tony, being in a school setting that falls short of this mark feeds directly into a negative view of homework and of academic literacy more generally. To these kids, doing homework means, at least in part, supporting a system which does not in turn support them. As a result of their anger over this, they ignore or resist most of the homework their teachers assign to them most of the time.

In many ways, then, these four boys' experiences *in* school and their resulting opinions *of* school shape both how they view homework and how they choose to engage (or not engage) with it. We have found that this dynamic works similarly, if to different ends, in the case of students who have positive associations with homework. In contrast with Marcus, David, Carlos and Tony's stories, "good" experiences around school have led a number of the kids we have talked with to be strongly committed—both in word and deed—to regular homework efforts. These good experiences may include: strong bonds with teachers, cultural familiarity in the classroom, support for their interests and styles of expression, parental accord with educational norms and ideologies, and/or a sense that school will provide the foundation for a successful future.

Consider, for example, Michelle's statement, cited in an earlier section, about the importance and benefits of homework:

> Michelle: I think homework is more important, because when you do your homework you learn more and the more you learn the more higher grades you go up and then you get into college and then you get a job and then you get money to buy a house.

While Michelle shares some of her classmates' concerns and cultural critiques about education—as her earlier-cited comments about "studying ourselves" indicate—her predominant view of school, expressed here, remains positive and hopeful. As we have already noted, she believes strongly in the value of learning and in the power of schooling to help her shape a successful future. In addition, she generally enjoys school time, and she has great respect and affection for her teacher, Mr. Coleman. Everything we have been able to gather from observing and talking with Michelle suggests that her good feelings about school suffuse her actions and hopes, as well as her stated opinions. She completes her homework thoroughly and regularly, for instance, despite her wish for a modified history curriculum and despite the difficulties of understanding she encounters from time to time. And, as she has explained to us in several interviews, Michelle sees educational success—which she believes will result from continued discipline and practice—as an important step in achieving her dream of becoming a doctor when she grows up.

On the whole, our research suggests that underlying these and other kids' attitudes about homework—angry ones and hopeful ones alike—is a sort of metonymic association. Homework comes to represent schooling itself. To the extent that schooling is valued, its promises and authority trusted, homework is a beacon: at best, a key to desired futures; at worst, a difficult or distracting necessity.

To the degree that schooling is criticized, however—its promises doubted and harsh power disdained—homework is viewed as arbitrary, annoying, and irrelevant, something to be resisted.

That said, we feel it is important to add that, for individual students, these two positions are neither static nor mutually exclusive. As Michelle's experience shows, young people can simultaneously feel both angry about the drawbacks of their academic encounters and desirous of the benefits of getting a "good education." Furthermore, inasmuch as young people's views and practices around homework are tied in with ongoing school experiences, they often change with time and circumstances. Such was the case for Anna and Tanika, two friends from FAST whom we mentioned earlier, and whom we have gotten to know fairly well over the course of our research.

We first met the girls in the spring of 1992 in the FAST after-school tutoring project. After helping the two of them and a couple of their classmates with a math worksheet one afternoon, we told them a little bit about our research project. Anna and Tanika agreed to talk with us the following week about their experiences of school and homework.

The first conversation we had with them had a polemical tone. We spent most of the meeting asking them about homework; they spent most of the discussion telling us how much they hated Ms. Freeman, their teacher. Every chance they had, they turned the conversation to how horrible Ms. Freeman was. In the course of an hour, we heard numerous accusations—that Ms. Freeman, herself an African American woman, was terribly racist; that she treated her students unfairly and unequally; that she did not listen to children; that she routinely blamed African American kids for everything that went wrong in the school; that she was two-faced; that she was a liar; that she was dishonest; and that she was mean. Anna and Tanika talked about their experiences with great emotion. They were both clearly and visibly angry. At one point, Anna even turned to the tape recorder and yelled, 'Ms. Freeman, I hope you're listening to all this.' She then turned back to us and said, 'I want her to know what I'm thinking.'

Though mostly we heard classroom stories and pent up feelings, we did gather some information about Anna's and Tanika's views of homework from this interview. Basically, neither of the girls was much into homework. They said they had too much, that it was too hard, that Ms. Freeman didn't explain it very well, that it was stupid, that it was boring, and that most of the time they did not do all of it. There were punishments set up in their classroom, the girls told me, for students who did not do homework. More than once, Anna and Tanika both had been kept in from recess or kept from going on field trips. Such punishments annoyed them, particularly because they felt that Ms. Freeman applied them unevenly. But the existence of consequences did not seem to encourage these girls to do their assignments. We got the impression that they thought that homework would not make a difference one way or another; even if they *did* do it, something bad was bound to happen at school which would invalidate them and ruin their day.

Over a number of months, we spent a good deal of time with Anna and Tanika and, as mentioned, we got to know them fairly well. During the summer after that first visit, we talked with them several times. Out of the immediate environment of the school and Ms. Freeman's classroom, the girls spoke more philosophically about education. They both agreed that going to school and getting a good education were important goals. Tanika said she wants to do well in school so she can someday go to a local community college and study hair cosmetology, like her mother. Anna said she thinks a good education will help her to have a successful future, 'to be somebody.'

When we asked directly about schooling experiences, their anger at Ms. Freeman was not far from the surface. But, out in the park in the middle of July, it was not their main concern. Instead, the girls spoke about the importance of learning—to be a good person, to act kindly, to treat other people well, and to make something of their lives.

In the fall, when Anna and Tanika got back to school, they found themselves in separate classrooms. Both girls liked their teachers immediately, however, and they continued to be relatively happy in their respective situations all year. Shortly before Thanksgiving, we spent an afternoon with Anna and Tanika and talked with them again about homework. The conversation and the girls' view of homework could not have been more different than our initial meeting. All the virulence and rage of that first interview was gone. Both kids explained that, being in new classes, they did more of their homework than they had in the past. When we asked them why, they replied that homework was important—that their new teachers, Ms. Gregory and Ms. Long, 'want to help you learn.' Even if particular assignments were boring or too hard or too time consuming, Tanika explained that she tried her best to do what she could. Both girls expressed a desire to do well in school during their 5th grade year; they felt that teachers mostly gave homework for 'good reasons' and both girls chose to participate in two tutoring programs so they could get help with their assignments four days a week. (One side note about the November conversation: About halfway through, Anna even took out her math homework and began working on it while we were talking.)

What we have learned from Anna's and Tanika's change of attitude, taken together with the FAST boys' cultural critiques, the concerns of young people trying to integrate their home and school worlds, and the many struggles and strategies kids encounter around getting their homework done, is about multiplicity. As homework from school filters into different kids' lives, it takes on different and situational meanings. Once it leaves the school grounds in kids' hands, it acquires its significance in relation to the rest of their particular personal and social lives. As we have explained throughout this section, young people come to understand, deal with, and do (or not do) homework within and with reference to a variety of interweaving and evolving contexts—family, culture, community, gender, friends, social class, and so on.[17] These contexts encompass both a variety of spaces and a sense of time which includes the past and future as well as the present. The fact of this multiplicity challenges the typical school view, which holds that homework, literacy and learning are—or at least should be—the same at all times and for all children. In reality, though, young people negotiate their understandings in personal and self-specific ways. What they see in homework, what they learn from it, and how they use it depends always on who and where they are.

THE NEGOTIATION OF IDENTITIES

As we have explained thus far in our analysis, following the travels of homework in kids' lives has brought into focus for us both the diversity of young people's learning experiences and the many overlapping contexts within which these experiences take place. We turn now to look more directly at some of the ways students engage homework in the creation, assertion and negotiation of their identities. It is our contention that, in many different settings, much of what plays out for young people around homework significantly involves and impacts who they are—emotionally, academically, interpersonally and societally. As our research shows, the ways kids (individually and collectively) relate to their assignments both reflect and shape the varied types of people—learners, family members, friends, girls or boys, and cultural/class subjects—they are continually becoming.

In the book *Becoming Somebody: Toward a Social Psychology of School* (1992), Philip Wexler elaborates on this process and suggests that, both in school and elsewhere, identity-building is one of the core concerns embraced by young people. As he explains:

> [Q]uestions of identity or self are at the heart...of social relations....What our studies show is how much in fact all of school life, for the students, centers around the daily project of establishing a social identity....In their own words, students are trying to 'become somebody.' They want to be somebody, a real and presentable self, anchored in the verifying eyes of friends whom they come to school to meet. While they are aware of a life after education, in the occupational world of work, and in varying degrees acknowledge interest and attention to the learning of school subjects, their central and defining activity in school is to establish at least the image of an identity. (1992: 128, 155)

Our own work suggests that this identity-formation has multiple aspects and that it takes place in a variety of conversations, interactions, choices, and activities. In particular, our focus on homework highlights some of the ways kids' identities flow in and around specific practices of language, literacy and learning. As Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) and John-Steiner et al. (1994) argue in a more general framework, such language and literacy practices play instrumental roles in the production of identity due to their many uses in the negotiation of power, authority, affiliations, and social differences. In what follows, we will detail some of the ways this works—in school and out, individually and collectively—for the participants in our study. By both revisiting old stories and introducing new ones, we will explore how kids use homework in stitching together many aspects of who they are. These aspects include: self presentation, individual and group memory, bodily inscriptions and experience, community and cultural membership, history, language, social position, access to power, and the drawing of inclusive and exclusive group boundaries.

Identity and homework outside of school

In the previous section, we looked at what happens when homework moves beyond the confines of school and weaves through various other contexts of young people's lives. Our main goal in that discussion was to describe connections and tensions among the different contexts. At the same time, though, we believe the experiences we have recounted offer many important insights about the creation and assertion of kids' identities.

Consider, for example, the critique of schooling generated by Marcus, David, Carlos and Tony. By resisting homework on the grounds that it both represents and contributes to a culturally-deprecating educational experience, the boys assert several things about who they are and who they want to become. To begin with, they demonstrate in no uncertain terms that their families and family-cultural backgrounds are important to them; one might even argue that the boys' refusal to do their assignments, given the (presumably) known academic consequences of making such a choice, suggests that for them family and cultural integrity are *more* important than schoolbooks, grades, degrees or diplomas. Over and above all else, these boys express a desire to hold on to who they are—young men of color whose futures and histories entwine with a sense of cultural pride and political movement. Their critiques of school make clear how painful it is to be denied that holding on. For them, facing a curriculum full of other people's stories and interests feels like a loss of self. In David's words, teachers and schools want you "to grow up bein' what *they* is," not what *you* are. Given all this, the only way the boys feel they can maintain their identities is to take distance from school—to individually and collectively back away, critique, challenge, and resist what the education system offers. Within the school framework, they construct their identities as a group-in-opposition—we are what is not here; we are what they don't respect; we will not be what they demand. More generally, the boys look to other arenas besides school for self-validation, cultural knowledge, and support. As they suggest in the quoted excerpt, and as they explain more fully in additional conversations about homework, their emerging identities are deeply and solidly rooted in the life-sustaining realms of family, friendship, culture, race and community.

In addition to these cultural dimensions, kids' experiences with homework outside of the educational arena also give rise to other aspects of identity. As the stories told earlier suggest, the fact that homework lives in homes as well as schools means it often plays a part in shaping young people's roles, relationships and experiences in families. Often, as we have seen, homework-related duties are clearly, if not necessarily explicitly, delineated in family terms. For example, we explained earlier that, in the Thompson household, older siblings (are supposed to) help younger siblings with daily assignments. This arrangement shapes ten-year-old Anna's experience of herself and her education; participating in a network of kin and support provides her with a specific sense of both what it means to be a sister and what it means to be a learner.

Similar dilemmas around needing and asking for help with homework also inform kids' relationships with their parents and guardians. As we noted earlier, the unequal distribution of time, academic resources and literacy skills among different segments of society means that not all kids in all families have access to the same adult assistance. The family and intellectual identities of young people which consequently emerge reflect these differences. Kids like Torrie and Randy Reed, for example, whose professional parents have the energy, inclination and educational backgrounds to help with homework, tend to see themselves as apprentices to their parents' knowledge, as family travelers on a shared journey of learning. On the other hand, young people such as Tanika and Renata from the FAST program live with parents who lack the time, skills and/or academic confidence to participate in their afternoon schoolwork. As a result of both this reality and their understanding of it, these kids develop a greater sense of separateness and independence with regard to issues of school-related identity within their families.

In some cases, the types of routines and responsibilities young people encounter in their homes change and flow with time. More often, however, the ways families deal with homework give rise to relatively stable, enduring roles and identities. Carol Stack has theorized such roles and identities in an earlier article, using the concept of "kinscripts." (Stack and Burton, 1993) As explained in that article, "kinscripts" call upon children to participate in specified ways in the collective labor needed for their families' survival. This labor may include, for a particular household, the development of learning and literacy skills, the maintenance of intellectual or academic dispositions, and/or the structured facilitation of family members' schoolwork, in addition to other types of tasks. To give an example of how this works in the realm of homework, recall that in Anna Thompson's family, the eldest daughter Yvette is "kin-scripted" to provide her younger siblings with the primary assistance they need to complete their daily assignments. Other children are supposed to both encourage each other to do homework when they get home from school and help out whenever possible. And all children in the Thompson household are given the responsibility to do what they can academically. Framed another way, all this is to say that kids' identities get shaped by their families' ideas about what their intellectual and educational responsibilities should be. As noted in the previous chapter, for instance, Torrie and Randy Reed identify strongly with education and learning because their parents believe that getting their schoolwork done is their main family job. In a related, though slightly different way, an academic identity within the family is also shaped for Elizabeth, the fourth grader from FAST who spoke to us about her father's traumatic accident. Within a framework of intense and multiple family needs, Elizabeth explains that she gets scripted for the part of the "student." "If *I'm* sick and I'm laying on this bed," she quotes her father as saying, "there will always be someone to help me. But you don't always get a second chance in life to go back to school and do well in the things you didn't do."

Adding concerns about household responsibilities other than homework to this analytical mix brings out more fully some of the tensions and complexities inherent in negotiating identities across contexts. Young people's dealings with the two kinds of homework they face suggest that, very often, they find themselves *simultaneously* becoming both certain kinds of family members and certain kinds of educational subjects. For Elizabeth or Randy and Torrie, as noted above, home and school provide similar expectations, and the kids flow with these expectations toward an academic and literacy-oriented self-understanding. For other kids, though, like those for whom household obligations are more important than homework, being a helpful, dutiful child at home may mean taking a more understated or detached role in the classroom.

One of the most striking examples of such an arrangement is to be found in the story of Woodside sixth-grader Karen Mendoza, mentioned in a footnote from the previous chapter. As we noted in the footnote, the needs of Karen's family—which call upon her to provide daycare for her 18-month-old brother and to assist with an array of other household chores—not only keep her from completing her homework most days, but on occasion even require her to skip school altogether. Observations of Karen in class suggest that, when she does attend, she spends most of her academic time hiding out in the back of the room, quietly putting forth a small measure of effort to understand class lessons but worrying very little about the work she cannot do or finish. On the whole, Karen treats and speaks of her family obligations more seriously than her school tasks; at the same time, she acknowledges that pressures from home are in tension with a type of engaged academic learning she also desires. Karen's experiences with this tension highlight the considerable impact of both social class and gender on the creation of young people's school and family identities. In her situation, it is, in the first place, pressing economic and practical need, stemming from her mother's chronic unemployment, which leads to a household dependency on kids' loyalty and labor for survival. Beyond this, the fact that Karen is the only daughter in a family with traditional (sexist) ideas about gender and work means that, ultimately, most of the responsibility for this labor—as well as a largely anti-intellectual identity to go along with it—lands in her lap.

We have chosen to revisit Karen's story here, in conjunction with several others from the section on "Embedded Contexts," to point out some of the ways young people's identities are shaped and negotiated around their experiences with homework outside of school. As we said earlier, once the school bell rings, homework travels with kids to a number of personal, family and community contexts. Within these contexts, the kids use it on various levels—literally and ideologically—to understand and assert themselves. As we have seen, many issues—including authority, loyalty, inclusion and exclusion, power, and possibility—inform young people's individual and collective struggles to shape their budding identities. In addition, regardless of differences, the choices, pressures, ideals and possibilities on which these identities are written always reflect both personal and family positions in a larger culture and society.

Bringing (or not bringing) it all back to the classroom

If following homework outside of the school arena brings into focus the diverse specificity of young people's individual experiences and identities, observing what happens when it comes back into the classroom provides a glimpse of its more collective uses in the academic and social worlds of students. On one level, every mention of homework in the school context invokes the whole range of different family, cultural and personal intricacies discussed above. When thirty-odd people's individual circumstances meet in a common discussion or classroom procedure, the meanings and uses of homework take on additional complexities. As young people's experiences come together and come to light within the school, lines are drawn, alliances are formed, self-definitions are asserted, and a variety of social positions are negotiated. In such a situation, understanding the significance of homework in the creation of identities takes on group and not just individual dimensions.

To understand how this works, let us return to Mr. Coleman's sixth grade classroom at Woodside Elementary School. It is 8:30 on an apparently typical Thursday morning, and the bell signaling the start of the school day has just finished ringing. Mr. Coleman steps to the front of the room and begins class with a command: "All right, take out your homework." For the next couple of minutes, kids rustle through schoolbags, pockets and desks or busy themselves trying to look inconspicuous. After a brief interval, Mr. Coleman calls for his class' attention, and the ritual of collecting and correcting homework commences.

For approximately 20 minutes, Mr. Coleman and his 31 students run through what looks to be a well-rehearsed and well-choreographed dance of intellectual, academic, behavioral, and social evaluation. Mr. Coleman stands at the front or side of the room conducting a question-and-answer session about last night's assigned social studies reading. Most students sit in "their" seats: some engaging directly in their teacher's discussion, some slouching or darting glances at each other across the room, some writing, some looking through textbooks, some drawing on desks or doodling. The topic at hand is "daily life in ancient Sparta," and Mr. Coleman is quizzing the class on its intricacies and on how they feel it compares to their own lives in contemporary America. Last night, the kids were requested to go over a section in their textbook on this subject and to answer several interpretive questions, which are still on the chalkboard. Mr. Coleman has set himself the task this morning of checking whether they have completed this work, and of trying to engross them in a discussion of the material. As is the case every day, some students appear interested and/or have done their homework, while others, for many of the reasons cited in earlier sections, either express indifference or have not finished the assignment or both.

The underlying process by which homework is checked and evaluated in Mr. Coleman's class remains fairly constant from subject to subject, day to day. Basically, it involves four things, all of which contribute to both external and subjective constructions of young people's identities. First, there is a surface exchange of content information, with Mr. Coleman asking for various facts—in this case, about Sparta—and a series of individual kids being called upon to provide them. In most cases, young people's ideas and responses emerge into a context where they are judged "right" or "wrong," with the standards determined by Mr. Coleman. In addition, "for the benefit of the class," Mr. Coleman seeks to ensure that certain bits, and often only certain bits, of knowledge come out over the course of the discussion (other thoughts, questions, insights, anecdotes, etc. get labeled "distractions" and pushed to the side). The question-answer format for this information exchange emanates from Mr. Coleman himself, and he directs the proceedings. Sometimes, the particular students invited to respond to his inquiries have their hands raised in the air, indicating their eagerness to enter the conversation; frequently, however, Mr. Coleman directs his questions pointedly toward young people who are reading, drawing, whispering to classmates, or in other ways not of their own accord volunteering to participate.

The pace of the whole process is fairly rapid, and students' informational responses vary widely in tone, length, format and "accuracy." As a result of both these response differences and the fast-moving discussion style, morning homework-check contributes to a delineation of knowledge, authority and power within the classroom. This delineation both shapes and circumscribes young people's identities. In broadest strokes, the process has two dimensions. Individually, kids' particular ideas and attitudes about homework material differentiate them as specific types of intellectual subjects; they become "knowledgeable," "ignorant," or "somewhere in between." At the same time, whatever their *personal* levels of homework prowess, all young people nonetheless share a collective structural position as novice learners; this leaves them with relatively little *ultimate* academic authority and power.

Second, woven in and around and through this exchange of facts and ideas is Mr. Coleman's teacherly evaluation, an assessment aimed at identifying which students have and have not done what, how well, and why. From the kids' point of view, this evaluation is experienced as both a critical *review* of their capabilities and a consistent, sometimes ruthless, *documentation* of their daily successes and failures. As a reviewer, Mr. Coleman comments throughout the discussion on ideas which he finds particularly interesting or irrelevant, clear or confusing; at the same time, students note that during the homework-checking session he spends much of his time walking up and down the aisles of desks, looking over their shoulders, scratching marks into his little black gradebook ("+" for "good," "√" for "fine," and "0" for "not finished"), and doling out praise and reprimand in nearly equal measure.[18] The effects of this personal and institutional assessment on young people's identities are two-fold. On the one hand, Mr. Coleman's documented evaluations spark emotional responses and dynamics related to the issues of intelligence and authority described above. Here, however, kids' situations and self-understandings are additionally shaped by a set of enduring academic consequences and disciplinary relationships. As we explained in an earlier footnote, Mr. Coleman (and other teachers) use homework as one means of assigning grades to students; because of this, kids' decisions and perceived decisions about doing homework play a role in the institutional and socio-economic sorting that schools perform. In addition, both academic and disciplinary evaluations can translate over time into statements or judgements about who individuals are more generally; because the consequences of numerous homework-check assessments cumulate, they often contribute to a labeling of kids as certain kinds of students, certain kinds of learners, certain kinds of people. As the interactions of the homework collection ritual in Mr. Coleman's class show, this sorting takes place largely at the *institutional* level. However, as we will explain below, the labels and assessments are not always put on kids solely by teachers and schools; sometimes young people also take up the characterizations themselves as they seek to assert and understand who they are becoming.

This brings us to the third point. It is not just Mr. Coleman and his expectations which shape the dynamics of the homework-checking process in this classroom; kids' actions, comments, and self-presentations also play an important role in determining the procedure's course and significance. Through a complex and differentiated litany of proud answers, tentative replies, false starts, excuses, mumbled commentaries, angry outbursts, and studied silences, the kids in Mr. Coleman's class individually and collectively act out their relationships to the many dimensions of homework, literacy and schooling. Within the classroom, the different approaches that particular students take in responding to homework-check questions lead them to both different social-academic circumstances and different identities. We would like to briefly explore these differences with a few examples.

To begin with, there are young people like Michelle, who answer Mr. Coleman's social studies questions eagerly and enthusiastically[19]. They treat homework-check time as an opportunity to engage with their teacher and with each other in a shared discussion about historical trends and issues, and with their participation, they send a message to all present that they care about schoolwork, that they put effort into homework assignments, and/or that they are interested in the stated curricular business of the classroom. Typically, the responses these students give to Mr. Coleman's questions are laced with confidence and curiosity. Moreover, it is a matter of personal pride to them that, whatever the topic under consideration, they can understand and provide information about it.

Quite apart from these young people are students like Karen, whose home situations make it difficult for them to keep up with homework and class reading, and who consequently need or choose to put on a somewhat different face. Instead of inserting themselves into the class discussion, these kids try to fade into the background as Mr. Coleman conducts his question-and-answer session; they hang their heads, avoid all eye contact, and sit quietly waiting for the evaluation period to pass. By and large, they neither challenge the proceedings nor attempt to participate in them. When singled out by Mr. Coleman to answer a question, they reply "I don't know" or, if possible, ask friends under their breath for answers and information. Young people like Karen take their teacher's reprimands silently, perhaps with a bit of shame. And, although once in a while they offer excuses or protests, most of the time they keep their business to themselves, projecting instead a classroom image of withdrawn and untutored indifference.

A third group, which includes rebellious students like Jared and Michael, helps to round out the social-academic spectrum in the homework scene. As we will discuss later, Jared and Michael are working class African American boys who hold a strongly critical opinion of school. Because education does not offer them the things they want, they do not exert much effort on its behalf. These kids' disengagement includes proudly and loudly refusing to do homework; in connection with this, they express a strong and clear resistance to participating in the homework-check history conversation. When, in the course of the morning evaluation, Mr. Coleman does call on them for an answer, they respond nonchalantly: "I ain't done it." "I didn't bring my book home." "Ask somebody else." These replies are followed by defiant smiles, glances toward friends, nods of the head, and other gestures of "coolness" and humor. Such gestures and self-representations come to mark out the "rebel crowd's" demeanor and territory. The fact that they contrast with the images put forth by other individuals and groups in the homework arena is deliberate all the way around; the social world of students turns on representation, and as a result kids manage their interactions carefully at all times and in all places (even homework discussions). We will explain this further in the section which follows.

Finally, as the homework-checking session progresses toward its conclusion, it becomes clear that these student-generated social undercurrents relate to and connect up with the institutionally-based academic and evaluative practices detailed before them. Specifically, the dynamics relate because they all center on particular kinds of comparison. This brings us to the fourth aspect of homework collection which we would like to mention. At the broadest level, we believe that the homework evaluation and checking ritual in Mr. Coleman's class involves a complicated process of academic and social positioning. This positioning ultimately rests on a multi-layered cataloguing of similarities and differences among kids, with the distinctions being created, recognized, documented and maintained by teachers, by the school as an institution, and by young people themselves.

In academic terms, this process of differentiation manifests itself as a separation of "good" from "bad" students—in terms of intellectual ability (often correlated with "correct answers" to Mr. Coleman's questions), in terms of effort, and in terms of "discipline" or attitude. An important part of the homework ritual in Mr. Coleman's classroom involves distinguishing those who have done their homework from those who have not, and Mr. Coleman frequently plays the two "types" of students off against each other. For example, after interrogating an individual—often quite pointedly—about why she or he did not finish last night's reading or questions, he may say to them, "Now listen to what Phillip is saying. Or Sonia. Or Brian..." With these names, he indicates the dependable homework-doers, those who always have "appropriate" answers and finished assignments. As he turns to these kids for correction or elaboration, he waves off the excuses of those whose work he finds incomplete or faulty. The juxtaposition sets both groups in stark relief. At one and the same time, the "good" students are praised—for their intelligence and their dispositions—and the "bad" ones are admonished or chastised. In addition, as we explained earlier, beyond this public labeling are enduring academic consequences related to grades, teacher perceptions, and disciplinary action. Such consequences serve to further, and in many ways more permanently, sort and separate Mr. Coleman's students; in doing so, they also contribute an academic dimension to these kids' attitudes about themselves and to their beliefs and attitudes about each other.

In social terms, the academic separations of individuals and groups within the classroom community lead to some clear and additional delineations of respect, camaraderie, and friendship among peers. As both Penelope Eckert (1989) and Paul Willis (1981) point out, young people often shape both their opinions of others and their own social, cultural and economic identities around particular educational dispositions. In Eckert's view, one of the main things that can draw schoolmates together—or keep them apart—is how they feel and act about school; whether one is a "jock" and cooperates with the ideologies and practices of academic institutions or one is a "burnout" and rejects them is often a matter of great social import. We find this to be true in general of Mr. Coleman's sixth graders, whose attitudes toward school, homework, and literacy or learning often translate into classroom alliances or animosities, and whose friendship groups tend to break along lines of "good" and "not so good" studenthood. The formation of social groups and identities unfolds during the morning's assignment check as young people look to friends and allies for validation of either their interest or disinterest in being part of the "homework crowd." Indeed, during this twenty-minute period, there are at least as many "meaningful glances" across the room as there are kids and opportunities; smiles, nods, grimaces, winks, and rolled eyes are all common sights and common expressive practices.

According to the analyses of Willis and Eckert, affiliations such as those being forged by Mr. Coleman's students tend to both reflect and reproduce class differences among kids and communities. We believe the creation of social and academic circles at Woodside bears this out; however, as we will explain below, we have found that, for the young people in our study, social positioning around homework is not tied solely to class. The external dynamics of knowledge exchange, evaluation and sorting and the subjective social and emotional experiences of kids in response to them are all shaped by issues of race, gender and culture as well as economic status. Throughout the rituals and performances associated with checking and collecting homework, there are a variety of ways in which young people get positioned along academic and related social axes. They are situated by the structures around them. They are molded by the classroom interactions in which they participate. And they are shaped by their own understandings of the authority, knowledge, learning and power relations encoded in daily homework experiences.

Identity, social space and classroom culture

In discussing our observations of morning homework-check in Mr. Coleman's class, we have detailed how identities get shaped around homework when it comes (or does not come) back to a structured, evaluative situation at school. Our argument is that much of what happens in the evaluative context—both socially and academically—concerns the formation of what we think of as "learning identities," identities that kids [develop/receive] as certain kinds of thinkers, learners, students, and educational subjects. With the present section, we would like to continue looking at the creation of identities around homework in Mr. Coleman's classroom. Here, however, we would like to emphasize how, in a group situation, young people's learning identities—emerging out of intellectual assessments and academic interactions—also connect up with other aspects of their experiences. As we noted above, observing what happens during homework-collection time shows how kids' personalities and positions are shaped around issues of intellect and authority, knowledge and power. We have also learned much from listening to kids' own thoughts and feelings about homework and about the rituals associated with it in their school environment. Any substantial group discussion of homework by students calls forth a great deal of social-maneuvering, self-definition and image-management. The resulting identities that get forged and asserted grow out of many dimensions of young people's worlds, notably (in this highly diverse setting) race, ethnicity, class, gender, family, community and thoughts about both the past and the future.

To explain how this works, we would like to describe in detail an interview/activity we did with Mr. Coleman's class on the importance of homework. This encounter both exemplifies and magnifies much of what we saw and heard as we met with groups of young people from Woodside and FAST over the course of our research. In many ways, the identity creation and management dynamics which emerge here combine elements of what we have been discussing in the two previous sections; these dynamics reflect both kids' *personal* homework experiences in the realms of family, culture, friendship, and community and their *collective* academic and social engagement with learning and literacy in the classroom.

We conducted the interview with Mr. Coleman's students one Thursday morning in January, a few months after we began visiting their class on a regular basis, and a few weeks after the homework-checking session described earlier. Our goal was to hear what kids themselves had to say about homework and about the ways it impacts their lives at school and home. For close to an hour, we talked with the assembled group of sixth graders. Mr. Coleman himself had left the classroom at the students' request; the roomful of young people who remained seemed excited to be participating "officially" in our research.

After some preliminary discussion about how homework works in their class, we asked the students how important homework was in their lives overall. Instead of taking verbal responses to the inquiry, we suggested they show their opinions by lining themselves up across the room in a "human continuum" going from one to ten. The side of the room marked "one" stood for an extreme feeling that homework is not important; by contrast, the side marked "ten" defined the territory for those who felt homework to be exceedingly important. We invited the students to stand at either end of the continuum or anywhere in between. We were looking for the subtlety of their opinions, and we hoped to subsequently engage them in a conversation which would reveal some of their nuanced views.

The class responded to our request, but not at all in the way we had anticipated. People did get up and position themselves along the scale we had indicated. However no subtle continuum was apparent. Instead, the students formed into two giant clumps, all the girls in the mid to "very important" section and all the boys across the room crammed into the "not important" section. One boy had actually chosen to stand somewhere in the middle initially, but as soon as he saw the gendered groups forming he went over and joined the boys.[20]

At the time, it was clear to both us and many of the students that people had chosen to express their "opinions" about homework not on the basis of what they intrinsically believed, but on the basis of where their friends—or at least others of the same gender—were standing. Throughout the course of the "continuum" activity, people were constantly aligning and realigning themselves in pairs and small groups. Everyone knew what everyone else was doing. On the whole, a few general trends structured the organization of people's expressed attitudes. It was obviously totally uncool for any boys to say that homework meant much to them. At the same time, many girls seemed to feel that, despite a variety of perceptions and experiences, it was important to produce a collective opinion; as a result, all the girls banded together on a positive, but moderate, view that homework *is* valuable.

When we tried to talk as a group about why people were standing where they were, a series of arguments broke out which lasted throughout the rest of the meeting. Basically, boys accused girls of being schoolish, being "teacher's pets" and being unrealistic by thinking so highly of homework. Girls accused boys in return of posturing, of lacking maturity, of misunderstanding their own futures, and of being hypocritical—*saying* that homework was unimportant when in fact most of them *do* their homework most of the time.

A number of more specific disagreements flared up as well when individuals or groups stated controversial ideas. At one point, for example, Michael and Jared, the two working class African-American boys whom we mentioned earlier as taking an anti-school stand during homework-check, proclaimed that they hated Social Studies and Social Studies homework. The specific reason they gave for disliking the subject echoes the critique of Marcus, David, Carlos and Tony discussed in the previous chapter. They feel that it is "unfair." Black history is not taught in their class, and they expressed a belief that the rest of the curriculum has nothing to say to them. In response to their comments, a few white and Asian-American girls argued back that it is *very* important to learn about history—both for the value of remembering "great" people's accomplishments and "because when you go to college you'll need to know about it." Immediately after this comment, Jared piped up with a question: "What if you don't go to college?" This sparked a number of responses. Not everyone goes to college. But some do. But most don't. And so on.

This interaction led into another debate, over whether doing homework does or does not necessarily lead to a good future. Michael, in particular, argued that just because people do their homework and get a "good education" does not mean they are going to be successful in life. He remarked, not without some irony, that many homeless people in his neighborhood in fact *do* have educations. He used this as evidence to support a claim that the promises held out by Mr. Coleman and others are not always fulfilled. An exasperated reaction to this came from Micki, a middle class Korean-American girl, who said quietly to her friend, "People [who think homework isn't important] are the kind of people who don't really want to learn and get a good education. They don't care about the future. They're gonna end up on the streets."

These and other arguments—for example, over whether families encourage or discourage people from getting their homework done and over whether teachers are *right* about the value of homework or just *powerful* enough to make people have to do it—left many kids agitated and upset. Homework is obviously an emotionally-charged topic for young people. Throughout much of our interview, the students were all talking at once, fighting about everything and gathering support for their own opinions from people who thought like them or were their friends.

What we witnessed in our hour with Mr. Coleman's class was, therefore, more than a simple discussion of ideas about homework and schooling. It was a complicated, multi-layered negotiation of social reality. As Scharf wrote that evening in her field notes:

> By the end of the class period, I was feeling insecure and a bit like this whole enterprise had been a dismal mess. It seemed to me that a lot of the kids were not taking my question seriously. I was pretty sure that they were not taking each other seriously, and it looked also as if they were not even taking themselves seriously. Looking back, however, I realize that even if they were not serious in any academic sort of way about providing me with intelligent, thoughtful, or particularly in-depth information about homework, they were indeed very serious about what was going on in the class socially. Everyone was looking around at everyone else. Feelings were high and reactions were everything. The reactions that mattered were not mine, of course, but rather the reactions of classmates. The things individuals said, the degree of thought they were willing to put into what they were doing, the stances they took toward me and toward homework were calculated to make certain impressions and to form alliances...While on the surface the students were talking and arguing about homework, on another level they were really talking about lots of other stuff—their lives and futures, their social positions and positions within the class, their peer groups and peer cultures, and their feelings about all of these.

It is our contention that, in this situation, as well as being the content of the conversation, homework was (and often is) also the context for the assertion of students' self-understandings and the positioning of particular people within the peer network of their class. As we explained earlier, the thirty-two young people whom we interviewed each brought with them to our interaction their own many-layered beliefs and experiences around homework. With the vast array of connections and differences in the air—partly resulting from the gender-mixed, multicultural, and socioeconomically-diverse environment—the classroom became a force field of social maneuvering. During the time we were together, the students were all doing many things simultaneously. As well as sharing some information with us, they were having a variety of other conversations—with each other, and with other audiences (perhaps their parents or their teacher) who were not physically present. In a variety of ways, these kids were using homework and opinions about it as a tool for their own self-understanding and self-creation. As we have already suggested, this was linked, but not limited, to defining their identities as students and learners. It also involved developing and building a number of other overlapping identities—identities related to gender, ethnicity, class, race, family, age and so on.

Part 3

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT'S SCHOOL ABOUT FOR KIDS?

The foregoing discussion has looked at how young people understand, experience and interact with homework on an everyday basis. It is our hope that, in this examination of homework as a literacy event and a social practice, two things have become clear. First, homework is neither a stable nor a static thing. It moves through space—from school to home and home to school; from children's desks to backpacks to buses to kitchen tables to living room sofas to bedroom floors; and from teachers' hands to students' hands, educational environments to other aspects of young peoples' worlds. Homework also travels through time, reaching both backward and forward with its promises, evaluations and consequences. And it pivots from one context to another, touching and touching down in learning situations, families, neighborhoods, friendship- and peer-groups, and cultural realms.

Second, young people's attitudes and identities are in many ways forged around homework as a contested field of meaning and practice. On the one hand, kids beliefs and actions are shaped by various personal, educational and social significances of school-sent-home. At the same time, what young people think and do feeds back into these realms of meaning, helping to define and create homework itself.

Because in many ways homework is not only a part of school but also a metaphor for it, we believe that understanding young people's relationships to homework reveals a great deal about their relationships to education more generally. This brings us back to the question we posed at the outset of this report: what is school about for kids?

The tools and insights of sociohistorical and sociolinguistic analysis have allowed us to learn from homework about the incredible complexity of kids' lives. We have seen in the "everyday" routines and features of many young people's educations an important discrepancy: while school and teachers view kids' classroom experiences as focused primarily on academic learning, gaining information, mastering skills, striving for good grades, and learning to be a student, young people themselves are busily engaged at every moment in a multifaceted negotiation of identity, position and future. What seems to us most on kids' minds is to figure out who they are, where they fit, and how the world (including its processes, information, relationships, and dynamics of power and authority) works. As we have discussed earlier, this includes, but also transcends, absorbing curricular and literacy information and forming identities as learners. It also involves constructing a number of other understandings and identities. Within the school framework, kids are always trying to figure out lots of different things—not just how math works, or how to spell or read, or how to behave—but also about how to make friends, how to get by, how to get ahead, how authority and power are used or could be subverted, how groups work, who their allies are, where they are in danger, what the contexts of their lives mean, and where they are headed as young women and young men in society.

Despite school-related ideologies and practices, then, kids are all the time involved in and having many overlapping conversations. Whatever the intended and purported meanings and uses of school, we believe that kids appropriate educational sites and activities at least in part for their own purposes. In the case of homework, young people use the responsibilities and pressures they are given to shape not only their curricular and literacy understandings but many parts of their lives. This is true too, we would argue, of the educational arena in general. Looking in a contextual, activity-based way at young people's experiences has taught us that, for kids, school is often about more than it appears or acknowledges. As the students we have talked to would be the first to point out, school provides the location, framework and materials for their *personal* and *social*, as well as *academic* learning.

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[1] This "multicultural feel" is conveyed in numerous small ways—from the artwork, photos and announcements on the hallway walls to the topics of monthly assemblies and drama/choral/dance productions to the stated concerns of teachers and the books on the library shelves. Diversity seems to be a key theme, and it is woven into many aspects of school practice. The school seems proud of its approach, notwithstanding both progressive and conservative critiques of multicultural efforts.

[2] For an interesting discussion of dialogue as a feature of ethnographic methodology, see the introduction to Michael Burawoy et al, *Ethnography Unbound* (1991: 4-5).

[3] Actually, as Thorne (1993) insightfully notes, schoolgoing young people often do not use *any* of our chosen categorical terms to describe themselves and each other. As she explains:

> 'What do they call themselves?' I badgered myself in an entry in my fieldnotes. The answer, it turned out, is that children use the same practices as adults. They refer to one another using given names ('Sally', 'Jack') or language specific to a given context ('that guy on first base'). They rarely have occasion to use age-generic terms. (1993: 9)

[4] On the first day of our involvement with the FAST tutoring program, Pat Johnson, a fourth grade teacher, offered a paradoxical explanation of the school's expectations for kids. On the one hand, she said that, as far as teachers were concerned, students' main job was to get their homework done everyday. On the other hand, she noted that some students were "behind grade level" and might therefore be unable to understand their homework or to complete it. Of the contradiction between these two positions she said little. Given the juxtaposition of uniform standards and acknowledged differences, however, we have to wonder if teachers really do expect all kids to live up to the stated aims of the school. Of course, they say they do and the system is set up as though they really believe everyone can do homework in the same way and to the same degree. Still, it seems entirely possible that, despite their words, teachers do not expect everyone to achieve the same goals or even to succeed.

[5] There are many dimensions to this dynamic. In the first place, there is a sense in school (at least coming from teachers, though it seems to come also from kids) that students need to know previous work in order to keep up with ongoing work. This is most especially true in areas like math and sometimes, though not always, science. It also applies in the realm of literacy; one needs to know how to read and to write in order to do other work which involves reading and writing. In school, this latter type of work involves most everything.

Beyond these dilemmas of knowledge and understanding, there are grades and other evaluative consequences which result from having unfinished or "incorrect" homework. Most directly, grades, labels, and accumulated attitudes are regularly created in sessions where homework is checked by teachers.

In addition to this, academic evaluations may result *indirectly* from a lack of complete or "correct" homework. Such evaluations are related mostly to tests, quizzes, and other in-class assignments which in some way depend on what has been done (or not) in a young person's homework. This can include things that were supposed to be learned "on one's own" in homework activities and/or things that were supposed to be studied or practiced in homework sessions. In both the direct and the indirect cases, the grades and assessments involved are often used to rank, sort and academically track kids in school. (For more information on tracking and sorting students, see Jeannie Oakes, 1985; Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, 1990; and Michel Foucault, 1977; among others.)

[6] As Michel Foucault (1977) explains, "discipline" in school and in society turns on the regulation of expression, disposition, appearance, etc. (See also Corrigan, 1990) Additionally, Ray Rist notes in his book *The Urban School: A Factory for Failure* (1973) that tracking and ability grouping of students in kindergarten often relate to, among other things, teacher perceptions of appropriate behavior and "schoolish" activity.

[7] All this is also compounded by the fact that there is an ideology about homework that says it puts kids in control of their own learning. As a result, despite the fact that much of what happens to kids in school relates to and grows out of social-class-based and race-based sorting, kids are taught to take their successes and failures *personally*. They are taught that their attitudes and opinions, as well as their relative abilities to get homework done, stem from personal characteristics and that if—and only if—they apply themselves, they will succeed. Many young people accept this explanatory framework, which centers around the idea of a meritocratic society, and as a result of responding critically to their (often not entirely merit-oriented) experiences in school, they may find themselves only "rising" to the place they're supposed to get to. See, for example, Bourdieu and Passeron *Reproduction in Education, Society & Culture* (1990, Chapter 3).

[8] We acknowledge Sonia's and Amanda's school success on the basis of various pieces of information: their own accounts, the stated judgements of their teacher (Mr. Coleman), the behavior of Mr. Coleman toward them during classroom lessons and discussions (i.e. praise, holding up their work or ideas as examples to be followed), the behavior of their classmates toward them during lessons and discussions (i.e. asking for help, looking to them for answers), the casual evaluations and comments of their classmates, and so on.

[9] Tanika has no siblings and does not feel she can depend on her own family—her mother or aunt—for assistance. Whatever "family" help she gets comes from Anna's family, with whom she is very close.

[10] School expectations regarding parent homework-help come through in other, less directive, ways as well. For example, soon after we began our observations in Mr. Coleman's class, we mentioned to him that not all kids seemed to complete their homework assignments, and asked him why he thought that was. His reply centered entirely on families and family structure; he stated that 15 of his students come from single-parent families, and said that he finds parental involvement in such families to be "not very thorough." In addition, Mr. Coleman noted that many of his students' parents are in school and thus "have less time to supervise their kids' work." His comments stressed that parents were the key to kids' homework success; these sentiments are echoed by teachers at Colton Middle School as well.

[11] As Christine Griffin explains in the book *Typical Girls* (1985), there is often traditional sex-role stereotyping involved in how chores and responsibilities get divided up among children within families. Despite the changing character of work outside the home—and the influence of feminism notwithstanding—girls are still expected to do significantly more housework than boys. Consider the case of Woodside 6th grader Karen Mendoza and her 7th grade brother Mario, both of whom live in the same working class Mexican-American family. In separate conversations, the two siblings discussed their respective family responsibilities. Responding to our interviewer's direct question on the matter, Mario explained that he has little to do around the house. His main job is taking out the garbage, and once that is done, he says, his time is basically his own. Karen's contrasting experiences of family work came out in a more casual lunchtime conversation one day. The researcher she was eating with inquired about her absences from school earlier in the week, and she mentioned that her mother had kept her home for several days. This was so Karen could mind her 18-month-old brother while their mother,

currently unemployed, spent the mornings looking for work. Karen notes that such extreme responsibility (requiring daytime/schooltime commitment) is relatively infrequent; however, she explains that she does assist her mother with daycare and other homemaking activities on a fairly regular basis during afternoon, evening and weekend hours. (In addition to Griffin's book mentioned above, see also Linn, 1991 and Harris et al, 1993 for more general discussions about gender and housework among young people.)

[12] Consider, by way of example, the following interaction between Margaret, a sixth grader and her teacher Mr. Coleman. It took place during a homework checking session one morning. Margaret had not memorized a set of divisibility rules for homework, and upon discovering this Mr. Coleman became annoyed with her. She explained that she could not do the assignment because she had to go somewhere with her mother until late the previous night. Mr. Coleman replied, without apparent irony, "You should have taken it with you. You could put it in your pocket and do it while you were out."

[13] Elsewhere, young people from the project have made comments to the effect that homework can be "fun," "relaxing," etc. or that it can make them feel good about themselves when they learn something or figure out a hard question. Interestingly, that is not part of Michelle's argument in this excerpt. In her statement here, she simply focuses on her long-range concerns; she does not discuss the question of immediate benefits from or desires for doing homework at all.

[14] Another way of looking at this is to say that Michelle understands, at some level, the fact that education is involved in sorting people—socially and economically—in American society. The sentiments she expresses here reflect a view of this sorting process as proceeding clearly, cleanly and predictably: those who work hard in school will do well in school, and those who do well in school will do well in life. For Michelle, then, doing homework is part of a strategy for "making it"; she believes that her educational efforts will help her climb the ladder of success.

It is interesting to note, however, that not all kids who favor homework over household responsibilities, believe as strongly as Michelle does in the promises and ideals of the educational "meritocracy." For some young people we have talked with, doing homework—while important—is not viewed as a guarantee of future educational or financial success. Rather, it is simply seen as a way of hedging bets and trying to keep from being selected out of the group of "kids with potential opportunity." (For more on the subject of education and social/economic sorting, see, among others: Bowles and Gintis, 1973; Willis, 1981; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Oakes, 1985; Fine 1991; Apple 1990.)

[15] Although we present this critique as it was given by one group of four kids in one interview, over the course of our research we have heard similar concerns voiced numerous times. In fact, nearly—if not literally—all of the African-American and Latino students we spoke with both at Woodside and in the FAST program expressed feelings and thoughts related to those explored here.

[16] The critiques and insights of these young people both echo and support a number of important academic analyses of schooling, race, class, and culture. Indeed, many scholars—individually and collectively—decry and denounce a broad-based underserving of African American and other minority youth by educational institutions in American society. Poet and essayist June Jordan summarizes the problem in general terms as it applies to African American young people:

> I know what went down for Black kids, the ones people dismissed as unruly, unteachable. What those children brought into the classroom: their language, their style, their sense of humor, their ideas of smart, their music, their need for a valid history and a valid literature—history and literature that included their faces and their voices—and serious teachers who would tell them, "C'mon, I see

> you. Let me give you a hand,"—all of this was pretty well ridiculed and rejected, or denied to them.
>
> Mostly Black kids ran into a censorship of their living particular truth, past and present. Nobody wanted to know what they felt or to teach them to think for themselves. Nobody wanted to learn anything from them. (1985: 28)

At a more specific level, critical scholarly work on race, culture and education details many interlocking mechanisms through which the exclusions named here function. Four in particular relate especially to the thoughts and experiences of the kids in our study: non-inclusive curriculum, style mismatch, silencing, and institutional racism. We would like to use this footnote to mention in brief some of the work done in these areas.

With regard to the first area, cultural critiques of curriculum by scholars of education emphasize a range of concerns. At a general level, critics argue that standard American school material centers primarily on the historical and contemporary experiences of white culture and white individuals, to the exclusion of information that would reflect the backgrounds and experiences of other groups in our society. (See, for example, Asante 1991, Lee et al 1990, Sleeter 1991, Carby 1982.) This creates, on the one hand, a lack of relevance for students of color who want to be able to "study about themselves." It also presents a distorted picture of the social world, whereby all students come to misunderstand the flow of difference and diversity in historical struggle and in the production of power, culture and knowledge. (Cummins 1988, Carby 1980, hooks 1982, Jordan 1988, Delpit 1988 and others) Finally, the centering of white (and European) experience tends to normalize and privilege white, European cultural norms, styles and values. This leads to an unequal appreciation of the behaviors, questions and knowledges of students of color. It also feeds into a second area of critique: style mismatch.

As Shirley Bryce Heath (1982,1983) explains, young people from different backgrounds grow into different, and culturally specific, ways of understanding and using language. These differences often translate to inequalities in classroom opportunity and success. This is because young people's varied understandings of learning, literacy, verbal interaction and authority do not all mirror the (white, middle class) norms of the education system to the same degree. Kids who do not come from the white, middle class "mainstream" are, Heath claims, at a particular disadvantage in school due to the mismatch between their linguistic styles and those of the dominant culture. This is especially true given that, on the whole, dominant cultural styles are enacted and enforced uncritically by teachers and schools. (See Delpit 1988.) In specific terms, the cultural mismatch of style often causes (genuine or apparent) learning difficulties, and it frequently results as well in relational clashes which usually get interpreted as "behavior problems." (For more detail, see Heath 1982 and 198-, and Delpit 1988.)

To take this argument a bit further, Signithia Fordham (1988) argues that, for African American youth in particular, an even deeper cultural chasm lies beyond the linguistic mismatch described in Heath's work. As she sees it, there is a fundamental incompatibility between, on the one hand, the individualistic, competitive, impersonal values and orientation of schooling and, on the other hand, the collectively-oriented culture of African American families and communities. As a result of this, African American kids—like Marcus, David and others in our study—perceive they must make a choice: succeed in school *or* retain their cultural identities. For them, Fordham argues, succeeding in school frequently comes to mean losing ties to the Black community, while keeping up cultural relationships and collective consciousness often leads to doing less well educationally.

Taken together, these cultural mismatches and the lack of inclusive curricula displayed in most schools have the effect of silencing the voices of many students of color. This is the third critical point we would like to emphasize. As scholars including hooks (1982), Ahlquist (1989), Delpit (1988), and Corrigan (1990) note, teachers and schools often function to shut out or denigrate students' languages, styles, experiences and ideas. As Corrigan explains:

> Most school students...most of the time are silent, or better, silenced. They are silent because their communicative capacities are regulated by the approved, proper, rewarded occasions for talk and writing....What "happens" in school is

> part of a more general structuration of expression through the domination of approved and encouraged times, occasions, reasons for talk or performance (and this always in approved and encouraged forms) *and* disapproval, discouragement, or denial of talk at other times as inappropriate....[M]ass-schooling systems were never intended to educate all the children, but were intended to (re)constitute the social identity of a minority and to regulate into confusion, silence, hesitation, and resentment the majority of those who have been schooled. (1990: 157-8)

Gloria Anzaldúa (quoted in Ahlquist 1989) describes the effects of such silencing:

> Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend did not give us the skills for writing not the confidence that we were correct in using our class and ethnic languages. I, for one, became adept at, and majored in English to spite, to show up, the arrogant racist teachers who thought all Chicano children were dumb and dirty....And though I now write my poems in Spanish as well as English I feel the rip-off of my native tongue. (Anzaldúa, in Ahlquist 1989: 12)

Finally, as Hazel Carby (1980) and others point out, educational practices exist not simply within classrooms but also within a broader social context. In the case of American society, this context is beset by divisive attitudes, images, and interactions. Because, in general, schools serve to reproduce aspects of the social order, they necessarily also function—sometimes unwillingly—as agents of institutional and societal racism. In addition to the aspects detailed in the above paragraphs, research suggests that this racism includes: the enactment of prejudices and systematic social exclusions, the masking and consequent reinforcement of power differences, the segregation and sorting of students through academic tracking, the unequal provision of cultural role models and images, and the perpetuation of stereotypes and ideologies of inequality and difference. (For more detail on these issues see, among others, Baldwin 1988, Carby 1979 and 1980, Cummins 1988, Delpit 1988, Fine 1991, Jordan 1988 and 1985, Oakes 1985, and Sleeter 1991.)

[17] Jean Lave's work on situated learning offers an especially rich sense of what "context" signifies with regard to thinking and learning. As she explains, "context" does not simply encompass *immediate*, personally-experienced surroundings (in this case, a classroom, family, or neighborhood setting and all the people, objects and relationships it contains); it also includes a variety of *broader social fields* of meaning and structure (for example, the economic system, the social organization of work, political arenas of opportunity and power, ongoing social "discussions" of gender relations, ongoing cultural struggles, and so on). For further exploration of these and other dimensions of the concept of "context," see Lave's discussion of "arenas" and "settings." (1988: 148-152)

[18] In addition, students from both Woodside and FAST have told us that teachers also impose other sorts of punishments on young people who do not do their homework. In Mr. Coleman's class, students with "chronic homework problems" (that is, those who, according to Mr. Coleman, regularly refrain from completing and turning in assignments) are required by their teacher to run laps around the playground after school. In Colton classrooms, we have heard from kids that teachers keep them in from recess and lunch breaks, prohibit them from going on class field trips, call their parents, keep them after school, or send them to detention for repeated avoidance of homework tasks.

[19] Michelle, as we noted earlier, often has difficulty understanding and completing homework assignments, especially in certain areas like math and English. She tells us, however, that social studies is her favorite subject—she enjoys class activities and finds the work both relatively easy and very interesting. Her attitude toward the particular homework-checking session we are discussing is

most likely colored by the subject-specificity, and should be regarded in that light. At the same time, her situation is by no means unique; on many occasions at both Woodside and FAST, we have noted similar variations of attitude within individuals as a result of factors like this (including reactions to textbooks, to specific teachers, to topics of inquiry, etc.).

[20] This was Brian, a white student from a middle class family whom Mr. Coleman had talked with us about a number of times, and whom we mentioned above as one of the "dependable homework doers" who often gets pointed out during homework-check time. According to his teacher, Brian is very intelligent and thoughtful, and his family encourages him (to great avail) in his school work. Mr. Coleman had suggested that Brian would be a good person to talk to us about "the value of doing homework." Brian's choice to stand where he did, therefore, was particularly interesting to us. It seemed to surprise (and even anger) some of the girls. Most boys did not say much about it one way or the other. Interestingly, in a later project where we asked each of the kids to draw a picture of how homework fit into their lives, Brian provided an extremely homework-positive response. We find this contrast especially striking.

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